

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



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OF THE ESTIMATED TEN THOUSAND INDIVIDUALS assisted by the Overseers in the second half of the eighteenth century a substantial number, perhaps as much as half, were assisted “out of doors,” that is, at home, mostly as occasional recipients of temporary and partial relief. Those who received outdoor relief experienced a personal and often repeated contact with the Overseers, one that helped define the ethos of poor relief in the eighteenth century.<sup>125</sup> But regardless of the numbers involved, the amount of public funds dispensed in the neighborhoods of Boston was overshadowed by the amounts spent for Almshouse costs. More important, the hardships of those on outdoor relief paled in comparison to the needs and suffering of those whose circumstances drove them to the Almshouse. The Almshouse, it should be remembered, was a refuge for the truly homeless, the ill, and the involuntarily idle.

Between late 1758 and 1800 some seventy-two hundred admissions were ordered into the Boston Almshouse by the Overseers of the Poor, for residencies of as little as a day to as much as several years. Between 70 and 80 percent of admissions were individual men, women or children, while the remaining admissions were nuclear or single-parent families. Of particular note are the numbers of repeat admissions. The same names sometimes appear as much as several times in a year or over the span of a few years. A dramatic example of this pattern was the case of Nathaniel Fowles, his wife and four children who were in and out of the Almshouse three times in one 10-day stretch in late 1793. So, the numbers of admissions is always greater than the actual number of individual recipients of Almshouse relief. The admission entries of those people have survived. Over half of them stayed for more than three months in the Almshouse, and a substantial number, as much as 10 percent of those who entered, lived in the house for more than a year. Between 20 and 25 percent of all who entered the Almshouse died there.<sup>126</sup> Unlike those who received outdoor relief, the Almshouse poor were wholly dependent. Yet they were considered to be fit subjects of public support. The naming of the institution was appropriate both in 1686, when it opened, and thereafter as it became the conventional seat of institutional charity. “Alms” is a “gift” given out of “pity,” aid given gratuitously to relieve the poor.<sup>127</sup> It is the “freely given” aid that best defines the philosophy and objectives of eighteenth-century Almshouse welfare.

The surviving Almshouse admissions and discharges documents in the Overseers collection represent the most extensive record of identified poor and dependent people in Boston in the eighteenth century, and while not as fully detailed as the manuscript documents of the early nineteenth century, the amount of information yielded by the eighteenth-century lists is far from spare.<sup>128</sup> The hundreds of manuscript pages listing thousands of Almshouse admissions reveal an extraordinary aggregate picture of institutional poverty and want, and while the Revolution appears to have created

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increased demand for institutional relief, the means and ends of poor relief were not affected by the Revolution in the short term. It would take a revolution in thinking about poor relief to bring substantial change to the means and ends of public charity in Massachusetts generally and in Boston in particular.<sup>129</sup>

Even then, there were some changes in the characteristics of the poor as they were entered into the control of the Overseers. The records show a more cosmopolitan Almshouse constituency, with clerks self-consciously referring to foreigners, and after the war to “Brittanors.” Following the Massachusetts emancipation of slaves, the period after 1780 shows many more African Americans entering the Almshouse as their freedom simultaneously made many of them instant paupers. Although they represented only 6 to 7 percent of all Almshouse admissions, their proportion of the Boston population was only 4 to 5 percent. After 1780 the rate of African-American admissions was about double the rate of the 1770s and nearly three times greater than the 1760s rates.<sup>130</sup>

Moreover, the volume of all admissions tripled after Boston’s recovery in the early 1780s. Boston’s population had shrunk dramatically in the mid-1770s because of the war, partial depopulation, and the devastation of the area’s economy. And here the major trend in poor relief in the post-independence era is most clearly revealed in the Almshouse records. In the period from 1774 to 1779 only about one-third of admissions were on the “province charge,” while for the five-year period after 1783 the figure jumped to 63 percent and then to 68 percent in the early 1790s. The figures were reliably reported because of the budgetary advantages to the Overseers of distinguishing town charges from province charges. Also, because the law required Selectmen as well as an Overseer to admit out-of-town persons to the Almshouse, the out-of-town charges are more easily recognized in the record, as town admissions show only the Overseer’s name.<sup>131</sup> Before 1774 the records do not always indicate the residential status of the inmate and cite only Overseers for all entries, and estimates of town to province admissions ratios are difficult to establish. The following estimates indicate the trend in admissions from a predominantly Boston cast to a broader regional, national and international one:

Total entries charged to	Town	Province (“State” after 1782)
8/29/1774 to 8/28/1779	233	80 (34%)
1/2/1783 to 8/30/1787	194	327 (63%)
1/1/1789 to 12/31/93	354	741 (68%)
1/1/1794 to end of 1800	1,152	1,141 (50%)

Foreigners, which now included Britons, were charged to the state, and in the 1790s the proportion of Almshouse admissions identified as foreigners rose significantly. A random sample of the recorded origins (“towns they belong to”) from the 1795–1800 period shows that 43 percent of all Almshouse admissions were from outside the United States. Boston and Massachusetts combined for 47 percent, and the remaining 10 percent came from elsewhere in the United States. Of those on the 1791–1792 Warning Out lists, approximately 25 percent were identified as foreigners,

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a much higher ratio than the pre-Revolutionary warning out statistics. Moreover, as noted, the new Act of Settlement of 1793, which modified the existing regulations for warning out, represented an important shift in the administration of transience in Massachusetts. While it was still technically required that persons demonstrate residency rights, the new laws offered twelve ways to acquire settlement, and warning out became more difficult, even if Overseers continued to “charge” other towns for the care of their poor.<sup>132</sup>

There was a rise too in the 1790s of the proportion of single persons in the admissions lists; in the two decades up to 1800 single men outnumbered single women in the Almshouse population. The wider meaning of that statistic awaits further study of the social history of post-Revolutionary New England. There can be no doubt that the shifts in the composition of the Almshouse constituency in the Federalist age have implications for many other social changes in New England. In any case, the general rise in demand for public welfare derived in part from rising population in eastern Massachusetts and from significant changes in the impact of economics on the demographics of the region and Boston in particular. The increased pressure on the Almshouse in the 1790s led to a movement for new facilities. By that time the original Almshouse was over one hundred years old, having been built to serve a town with a population of about forty-five hundred. It had been enlarged by an addition of about 50 percent more space in 1742, and even if that and the 1738–39 Workhouse had eased the pressure at midcentury, by the 1790s it was once again discommodious, and because of its age, decrepit.<sup>133</sup> The Workhouse of 1738–39, when the town’s population was about thirteen thousand, had been inspired first by a rapidly growing population and then by the overcrowding in the Almshouse brought on by the mingling of two kinds of poor: the deserving, and the indigent. Before 1739 the town records used the terms almshouse and workhouse to describe the dual functions of the Almshouse building, and there were clear attempts to keep the indigent poor away from the deserving poor (there would have been separate entrances to the building), but some mingling was inevitable. After the completion of the Workhouse the distinction between the inmates, and the supervisory roles of the keepers was made clear in the records. That timely institutional separation and the fact that Boston’s population did not grow between 1742 and 1784 meant that, as taxed as the buildings’ capacities became during times of rising demand, they were not continuously overflowing. After 1790, however, rapid population growth and the pull of economic opportunity in Boston put increased pressure on the overall civic infrastructure of Boston. The complex of Almshouse, Bridewell, and Workhouse at the northeast edge of the Common was by then clearly overwhelmed.

*The following charts summarize the surviving recorded admissions to the Almshouse from the end of 1758 to early 1800. The figures presented here are estimates only, and were compiled by simply counting entries. There were difficulties in sorting out duplicated entries, and given the often unclear definitions used by the original clerks, many of the gender, age and family designations cited here have been determined by the author.*

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### **Admissions: November 9, 1758 to December 31, 1774**

Individual men	538
Individual women	592
Men with children	2
Women with children	205
Men and women with children	38 (19 families)
Men and women with no children	70 (35 families)
<b>Total white males</b>	<b><u>608</u></b>
<b>Total white females</b>	<b><u>677</u></b>
Individual children	306
Children with parents	208
<b>Total children</b>	<b><u>514</u></b>
Indians	3
African American males	21
African American females	13
<b>Total African American</b>	<b>34</b>

**Total admitted (persons)**                    **1,836**

Discharged, ran away, or bound out        891

Dead    424

The differences between the dead and discharged and the total admissions is about eight hundred, and indicate underreporting.<sup>134</sup>

### **Admissions: January 1, 1775 to September 30, 1788**

Individual men	563
Individual women	624
Men with children	9
Women with children	122
Men and women with children	34 (17 families)
Men and women with no children	76 (38 families)
<b>Total white males</b>	<b><u>627</u></b>
<b>Total white females</b>	<b><u>801</u></b>
Individual children	177
Children with parents	203
<b>Total white children</b>	<b><u>380</u></b>
African American males	36
African American females	44
(includes 3 couples)	
African American children	19
(includes 9 with women)	

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<b>Total African American</b>	<b><u>99</u></b>
<b>Total admitted (persons)</b>	<b><u>1,909</u></b>
Discharged	249
Ran away	164

Again there is a considerable discrepancy in the numbers recorded as admitted and those who were discharged or ran away. Even allowing for a 25 percent death rate, there is a clear underreporting of those leaving the Almshouse.

### **Admissions: October 1, 1788 to August 30, 1795**

Individual men	601
Individual women	475
Men with children	8
Women with children	66
Men and women with children	36 (18 families)
Men and women with no children	50 (25 families)
<b>Total white males</b>	<b><u>652</u></b>
<b>Total white females</b>	<b><u>584</u></b>
Single children	118
Children with parents	151
<b>Total children</b>	<b><u>269</u></b>
Indian	1
African American males	48
African American females	36
African American children	8
<b>Total African American</b>	<b><u>102</u></b>

**Total admissions (persons)** **1,603**

Discharged, ran away, bound out, died 1,097

Here too the numbers who are reported to have left the Almshouse are clearly too low, even if we allow for about 500 deaths in this period.

### **Admissions: September 1, 1795 to early 1801.**

Individual men	766
Individual women	665
Men with children	no evidence of any

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Women with children	60
Males and females with children	24 (12 families)
Men and women with no children	30 (15 families)
<b>Total white males</b>	<b><u>799</u></b>
<b>Total white females</b>	<b><u>752</u></b>
Individual children	107
Children with parents	118
<b>Total children</b>	<b><u>225</u></b>
Indians	9
Lascars (East Indian sailors)	7
African American males	65
African American females	49
African American children	21
<b>Total African American</b>	<b><u>140</u></b>
<b>Total Admissions (persons)</b>	<b><u>1,926</u></b>

These charts show changes in the composition of the Almshouse population that reflect some change in Boston's social and economic conditions over nearly a half a century. From the outbreak of war in 1775 to the early nineteenth century Boston society was subject to a succession of disruptions that redefined it. While the infrastructure of civic government survived, as did its political and economic ruling classes, a great part of the earlier population had been replaced. The evacuation of Boston in the 1770s and the town's eighteenth-century nadir was followed by a population boom in the 1780s and especially in the 1790s that had created a more fluid and less settled working-class population. In the Almshouse there was a decline in the ratio of families to general population and a clear and steady increase in the numbers of single adults, from about 60 percent of the whole of admissions in the 1760s to 75 percent by 1800. As noted, men outnumbered women in the Almshouse by the end of the eighteenth century. Children, either alone or with parents, declined as a percentage of the whole, from 28 percent in the first chart to 12 percent in the 1795 to 1800 lists.

As for the out-of-town admissions, these should be understood in relation to Boston population figures, especially those of the 1780 to 1800 period, as should the rapid increase in African Americans in the Almshouse, who were admitted at a rate considerably larger than their proportion of the general population. Boston's population in the eighteenth century showed the following boom, static, bust and boom cycle:

1700	6,700
1710	9,000
1720	11,000
1730	13,000
1740	16,382 (in 1742)



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1750	15,731
1760	15,631 (in 1765)
1770	15,520
1780	10,000
1790	18,038
1800	24,937

In 1742 there were 1,374 (8.4% of the total population) African Americans in Boston; in 1750, 1,541 (10%); in 1760, 1,241 (8.0%); in 1765, 848 (5.5%); in 1790, 766 (4.2%) and in 1800, 1,174 (4.7%). In the 1795 to 1800 period, African Americans constituted some 7 percent of Almshouse admissions. Before the Revolution, their percentage of the Almshouse population had been only about 2 percent, in large part because slaves were normally cared for directly by their owners and would be admitted only in extraordinary circumstances.<sup>135</sup> As for Boston's demographics in relation to its hinterland, it is of note that during the eighteenth century the Massachusetts population grew from 56,000 in 1700 to 188,000 in 1750, to 235,000 in 1765, to 379,000 in 1790, and to 423,000 in 1800. The near doubling of the Massachusetts population from the end of the Seven Years War to the turn of the nineteenth-century taxed the public welfare systems of all towns in all regions and put additional pressure on Boston's poor relief physical and financial capacities as Boston attracted more and more migrants by the end of the century. As the admissions summaries show, the average annual admissions rates doubled between the late 1750s and the mid-1790s. As this trend continued, it inspired serious calls for reform of the poor relief system in the early nineteenth century.<sup>136</sup>

Boston, with a static or deteriorated tax base, remained the principal magnet for Massachusetts's increasingly mobile population, yet its Overseers were stuck with a dilapidated century-old Almshouse, its half-century old annex, and a crowded Workhouse. By the 1790s, as the Almshouse admissions swelled, the system in Boston was strained to the breaking point and would eventually become untenable. By then the new State House and a gentrified residential community had encroached upon the old site. And after 1790 Boston's population doubled every twenty-five years or so well into the nineteenth century, passing the 100,000 mark during the 1840s. By the age of Jackson, indeed, the scale and nature of poverty, and the "science" of applying numerical analysis to social problems, would change the meaning of poor relief beyond the imaginations of the eighteenth-century Overseers of the Poor. But at least to the turn of the nineteenth century the Almshouse retained its character as a haven for the needy and still reflected the philosophy of an earlier standard of paternalistic charity. Its routines, dietary regimen, and resident mix of men, women, and children of all ages, in families or alone, created a small intimate society. There was discipline, to be sure, but it had no clear intention to correct or even rehabilitate, and certainly no mandate to force the inmates to labor or to punish them.<sup>137</sup> In 1795 the buildings and land containing the Almshouse, Workhouse, and Bridewell were put up for sale and a new set of facilities was proposed for land obtained at Barton's Point. The days of the

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hundred-year old Almshouse were numbered, but the land at the corner of present-day Beacon and Park Streets on which the public welfare nexus had sat for decades, was not cleared until 1801, when a new Bulfinch-designed Almshouse was opened in Leverett Street at Barton's Point, near present-day Causeway Street. That building was about twice the size of the old Almshouse and while it had not been intended to be a catchall for Almshouse and Workhouse admissions and some prison functions, it served those purposes for most of its twenty-five year existence. It must have been impressive as public buildings go, and has been seen as the next most important, after the State House, of the many Bulfinch buildings in Boston.<sup>138</sup>

Any attempt to describe the daily routine of the old Almshouse with precision would be futile. But some assumptions can be made on the basis of the dense if silent statistics and the infrequent brief comments of the record keepers, and through the one known census of the Almshouse and inventory of its stock, taken in 1756. In the census of 1756, according to the clerk, 133 persons shared the thirty-three rooms of the house. Some 73 of the total population were women, including 17 with children. Twelve of the occupants were children without parents, but only four of those are named, in contrast to all the adults. Of the children who are named, all but one show up in the indentured lists for the period, along with four of the children who were in with their mothers. Altogether there were 44 children in the house in August 1756, including 32 who were lodged with their mothers. One woman inmate had five of her children with her, and another had four. Those figures are in keeping with the proportion of children who show up in the admissions lists for the late 1750s and early 1760s. The number of single men and women in the house, 24 and 48 respectively, also conforms roughly to the admissions ratios of the period. Five deaths were noted, probably reflecting changes from a previous census. There were three husbands and wives in residence, including one with a child. From newborn children to a ninety-two-year-old woman, and from a room with nine people in it to one with a lone woman occupant, the house resembled both a familial commune and a transient hostel. There were two "negro women" lodged with three other women and a child. There was a strict separation of the sexes, except when the married couples were lodged with single women. The tenure of this list of occupants is unknown because it cannot be matched to anything else. The admissions lists for 1756 have been lost, as have all those prior to 1758.<sup>139</sup> But slightly later figures, including the estimates of Stephen Wiberley, indicate that more than half the adults had been in the Almshouse for up to three months, and perhaps as much as a quarter of the adults for six months. A fragmentary list from September 1765 indicates that of the 37 inmates then in the Almshouse on the "province charge," 13 had been there for six or more months. That ratio fits the earlier and later estimates for residential continuity.<sup>140</sup> Not only would this little community be on familiar if subordinate terms with Samuel Proctor, the Almshouse keeper in the 1750s and 1760s, but each would have personal contact from time to time with an Overseer. The inmates ate together, prayed together, and attended lectures together. There was some freedom to leave the Almshouse during the day, for some, but most were

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confined to the premises. The simple daily routines of laundry, cleaning, schooling, cooking, and chopping wood were shared.<sup>141</sup>

Criticisms of the Almshouse were made by inmates and contemporary observers, and historians too have decided that the Almshouse was neither safe nor healthy. Towner claims that children were happy to be bound out because the Almshouse was less pleasant, apparently, than any destination they might have. He cites an observation of Cotton Mather, from 1697, who reported that one Abigail Day “had complained bitterly about the food at the almshouse, saying that ‘she would thank neither God nor Man for such Victuals’ and about the master of the house, who, she said, ‘had several Times made Attempts upon her Chastity.’” And even the Bulfinch Almshouse of the early nineteenth century after only a few years of operation was considered unhealthy. Towner quotes a pungent 1819 Overseers report on construction at the site, which complained that the old “vaults” for the Almshouse “privies” had been directly connected to the water drain from the kitchen pump and cast a stench, according to rising tides and east winds, “not only...through the yard ... but ... into ... the body of the house.” Towner concludes: “Whether or not these pictures indicate the true nature of the food, the morals, and the smells of the almshouse, they suggest that getting out was a good thing [for children at least].”<sup>142</sup> Perhaps it was, but getting into it was also a good thing for thousands of others. As to the indictment of the keepers, it seems that the Overseers kept a tight rein on their assistants in both the Almshouse and the Workhouse.

There is very little documentary evidence on the Almshouse keepers, but what there is indicates that what Mather reported would not have been tolerated for long by the Overseers. They constantly supervised the keepers and scrutinized their accounts and behavior. When they got a good one, they kept him or her. When Henry Dyer died in 1742, his widow, Hannah, took over the position only after a two-year review. Samuel Proctor held the position for nearly twelve years because he could be trusted to look after the inmates as well as the finances. A handful of marriages were recorded as having taken place in the Almshouse, and it is tempting to think of them as compelled by the keepers or Overseers because of a pregnancy incurred there. In eighteenth-century terms, accommodations, diet, hygiene, and regimen of the Almshouse, even if it was unpleasant for some, would have been preferable to the conditions that prevailed in either the hovels or homelessness that were the alternatives for most of the poor. For others, who were sick or handicapped or aged, care was provided by doctors and possibly in some cases by attending relatives. From the earliest surviving Overseers financial records, from the 1740s, there is ample evidence of a sustained medical budget that was used to engage doctors for the Almshouse and Workhouse and “poor of the Town.” The Overseers appointed at least one doctor a year to work on contract for the care of the poor, as follows in this example from 1744:

Doctor William Rand was unanimously chosen Physician for the almshouse and for the poor of the Town—on the following Terms:

Five Shillings old Tenor per day for visiting the Poor of the Almshouse and work house—

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Five Shillings for the first visit of the Poor out of the House[;] 2/6 for after visits—

Medicine to be charged at [?] price[;] for amputation and salvation Ten pounds Old Tenor.

That function was sustained throughout, as is evidenced by the following note from an Overseers meeting in 1789:

Noted that Docter Aaron Dexter be physician to the Almshouse & Workhouse for the year ensuing. That the Docter's sallery be thirty pounds per annum for Medicines & Attendance, Sallivations in extraordinary Cases in the Almshouse & Workhouse. That the Physician be oblig'd to attend personally at both Houses at least once a Day & that he practice Physic, Surgery & Midwifery in both Houses & attend when call'd upon by any overseers to visit the sick in any of the wards. I agree to take the care of the poor of the Town on the above terms also to receive One hundred & twenty pounds [?] of the State for the same attendance on their poor. Commencing the 15th May 1789. [Signed] Aaron Dexter.<sup>143</sup>

The Almshouse, for many, was the only place to go to be treated for illnesses as varied as gonorrhea (“ye French P[ox]) or the “itch” or to be “salivated for ye [smallpox].”<sup>144</sup>

It is worth noting the 133-year span of Mather's remarks and the Towner quote from 1819 and the fact that anyone at any time could find a reason to criticize the poor relief system from any side of the issue of public welfare. Still, by the 1790s criticisms of the crowding and hygiene of the old Almshouse were not only being made by the Overseers, who were perennially appealing for more space and more protection for the deserving poor, but by others in the community, some of whom simply wanted the Almshouse removed from its site near Boston's grand new landmark, the State House. After 1801, according to a late nineteenth-century reflection by Nathaniel Shurtleff, one could now walk in the Common or in Beacon Street and not be

interrupted by the diminutive hands thrust through the holes in the almshouse fences, or stretched beneath the decaying gates, and by the small and forlorn voices of the children of the destitute inmates entreating for money...nor will the cries of the wretched poor in those miserable habitations [the old 1686 Almshouse] be heard calling for bread.<sup>145</sup>

The poignancy of Shurtleff's description reflects more his high Victorian sentiments and literary habits than it does the reality of even the worst conditions in the old Almshouse and Workhouse setting. But it indicates the lingering and persistent reputation of the old Almshouse as a decrepit refuge for the town's needy.

As for diet, there is no way of knowing whether or not what Almshouse residents were supposed to have is what they received. Cooking, brewing and eating areas were clearly laid out in the Almshouse of 1686 and its replacement in 1801, as were rules for assembly, meal times and proposed diets. No dietary chart exists for either the Boston Almshouse or the Workhouse before 1819. We can assume that a New York

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Almshouse menu for 1736 discovered by Stephen Wiberley corresponded roughly with what the Boston poor would be offered. The foods listed below do also correspond with dietary evidence from Boston in the first half of the eighteenth century.

### **Weekly menu for the New York Almshouse, 1736:**

Breakfast:	Dinner	Supper
Sun. bread and beer	beef or mutton, with broth and herbs in season	sappan and milk
Mon. milk porridge	pork and pease porridge	bread and beer
Tues. sappan and milk	As Sunday	bread and cheese
Wed. beef broth and milk	fish or pork and pease	sappan and milk Porridge
Thurs. milk porridge	beef and cabbage	beef broth and bread
Fri. sappan and milk	as Sunday	bread and cheese
Sat. bread and beer	pork and pease porridge	sappan and milk or sugar <sup>146</sup>

This regimen is marked by at least two prominent characteristics: first, the amounts per serving are not shown but in the case of bread, porridge and sappan (most likely a boiled cornmeal mush) there was probably enough for the diners to fill themselves with caloric and carbohydrate bulk and there appears to be adequate protein in the diet. Second, the repetitions in the diet reflect inventory availability and control, and preparation efficiency. Feeding upwards of 150 persons required some careful organization.

The following Boston Almshouse menu from 1819 shows some changes in the varieties of foods on offer but also some persistent items such as broth (given here as “soup”) and porridge. But there is some emphasis on “Plenty of Vegetables” and the diners are encouraged, it seems, to eat their fill. It is worth noting the strict orders regarding behavior.

### **Bill of Fare for Boston Almshouse**

1 Quart of Milk Porage for Each grown Person in Proportion for Children-  
Each Morning in the week for Breakfast-

Mondays Wednesday & Friday

Boiled Rice and Mollasses for Dinner Each Day

Sabbath day Tuesday and Thursday

Beef or Mutton Soups with Plenty of Vegetables Each of those days

Saturday Salt Fish Potatoes Carrots & Beats with Butter or Dip-when out of  
Fish-Baked Pork and Beans-or Beefs head Soup

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For Supper Each day in the week

1 Quart of Bohea Tea Sweetened with Molases with Sufficient Milk for the Same with Bread—no Butter, nor Chease allowed the paupers in the almshouse—that are in health—no Rum or any other kind of spirit used in the Almshouse but for medicine—4 Hhds [hogsheads, about 85 imperial gallons] of Beer Brewed Weekly for the use of the Paupers—3 pounds of hoops [hops] & 3 galls of molasses to each Hhds—as all the Paupers Breakfast Dine & sup together except the Sick—they have Liberty to eat as much as their appetite Craves—but are not allowed to Carry any food from the victualing room.

Notification on the Door of the Dining Room

Notice

Any Subject of this house who may be found Bringing in any kind of Spirits Shall be put under Confinement –any Person who goe out of this House to Return the Same day and do not Return –shall be confined until released by the Overseers of the week.<sup>147</sup>

The Boston Records tend to bear out the adequacy of the Almshouse and Workhouse diets, and while there were times when food was scarce, those are rare, and occurred during crises such as smallpox or wartime evacuation or disorder.<sup>148</sup>

The Almshouse population of 133 in 1756 was close to the capacity of the old building's design, with variations allowed for various types of residents and the rate of turnover. There were several ways of being released from the Almshouse. People were discharged to their original places of residence if they were not legally resident in Boston. Bostonians were released into the town when they found work or when they had recovered from illness; children were bound out to service, as were some adults; death took many of the very old, who in some cases had been admitted to the Almshouse for comfort and company in their final days, and death took some of the very young too; some inmates “ran,” as it was recorded, which meant simply that they left of their own volition without formal release, in some cases under threat of being transferred to the Workhouse; some were, in fact, sent to the Workhouse if their behavior threatened the order or security or the morality of the Almshouse.<sup>149</sup> It could likely accommodate up to about 200 individuals with some effort (six to a room) and 160 in relative comfort if families were mixed into the population. Various sources have suggested Almshouse populations as low as 110 in the 1740s, and even lower in the first few decades of the smaller 1686 Almshouse, and as high as 250 in the 1760s, and even higher in the 1790s. While the crowding suggested by the higher figures could not be sustained for long, and was quite likely the result of temporary surges in demand, it is certain that by the 1790s, the Almshouse was persistently overcrowded.<sup>150</sup>

By the end of the century the days of the old Almshouse building as a refuge for the deserving poor were clearly numbered. Overcrowding and a subsequent deterioration of rudimentary sanitation alarmed Overseers and private philanthropists alike, and groups such as the Humane Society supported the Overseers in their attempts

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to replace the Almshouse. The Reverend Mr. Clarke's "Discourse to the Humane Society" of June 11, 1793, bubbles with indignation, and his invocation of John Howard, the late English prison reformer, is of particular note. Mr. Clarke's observations not only echoed an Overseers' report of 1790 but also added a measure of moral urgency to the matter:

[The 1686 Almshouse] is wholly inadequate to the purpose. It wants every requisite to a place of refuge for age, sickness, and poverty. The benevolent Howard would say it is rather a dungeon than a hospital. It can neither be ventilated nor properly cleansed. And it is altogether disproportioned to the number of those, whom necessity drives to the melancholy retreat. The evils unavoidably resulting from bad air and filth, are notorious. These evils, neither the physician nor the overseer can prevent. As long as our poor are so ill accommodated, poverty and dependence will be the smallest of their calamities. How powerfully then, does humanity plead in behalf of these sufferers? Of what importance is it, that they should be provided with a better habitation! How much are the publick honour and character concerned in such a measure!<sup>151</sup>

An Almshouse committee report to the Town Meeting in 1790 states: "the building now occupied for the Almshouse is too near the Center of the Town, and not sufficiently Large to accommodate the Number of the poor at present in the House—previous to the War—the number did not exceed. 150 ... or 180 ... in the Winter season. nor 100 ... or 120 ... in Summer—There are in the present month of August between 270 ... & 280 ... in the ensuing Winter it is Probable that there will be between ... 300 and 400 —."<sup>152</sup> The report goes on to describe the house and the yard as "foul," "disease-ridden," with an increasingly noisy and "profligate" component who were a constant threat to the manners, morals, and health of the deserving inmates. While the Almshouse had become unsanitary and had far exceeded its population capacity by the Federal age, the Workhouse, on the other hand, even into the 1790s, was less subject to overcrowding because it had a very limited residential capacity and a far more specific type of inmate.

The Workhouse was only half the age of the 1686 Almshouse, and was a very substantial structure by the standards of the day even though it was over a half-century old. The design of the Workhouse building is known from a 1737 report that confirms its location next to the Almshouse. It was contiguous with the prison and at least one of its rooms was assigned to the institutionalized insane.

As to the Model of the House, the Committee Propose, that it be One Hundred and forty feet long, Twenty feet Wide, Sixteen feet high, from the lower Floor of the House to the upper or Garret floor, To be Built of Brick, to be upon a line and face to the South West, the Chimnies all on the North eastern or Backside, A Common Hall of Thirty two feet long, Five Other Rooms, All

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these below; Nine Chambers, the Roof pitch'd whole, A Well A Convenient Separate House for Washing, Brewing, and Baking; And a House of Office.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, this building was not primarily residential. The structure was as large as the Almshouse, which contained thirty-three sleeping rooms (“chambers”) in contrast to the nine allowed in the Workhouse. The majority of the indoor area was given over to working space, for the employment of the “able” poor and the belligerent.<sup>154</sup>

Apart from the financial references to Joseph Lasenby, a long-serving Workhouse keeper of the 1750s to the 1770s, the Overseers’ accounts and the admissions and discharges of Workhouse inmates noted in the Almshouse admissions make only scattered notes on the Workhouse throughout the eighteenth-century documentary record. The only sustained records of Workhouse inmates for the eighteenth century are the names of several dozen women at work picking oakum for several months in the 1790s. As late as 1794 efforts continued to break even on the Workhouse operations, but as early as 1741, the committee that audited the Overseers’ accounts had found that the overhead costs for the Workhouse exceeded the value of the product of the inmates’ labor:

By which it Appears the Neat Charge of the Workhouse for Nineteen Months past is Five Hundred Fifty three Pounds Fifteen Shillings Due on the Maintenance of said House, during which Term taking One time with another, We find there has been Upward of Forty People provided for, and that there is now in said House Fifty-five Persons, Vizt. Ten Men, Thirty Eight Women and Seven Children. We also find that the Furniture of said House Amounts to Two Hundred Twenty three Pounds Eight Shillings and Six pence, that there has been laid out for Clapboarding the Backside and other Repairs of the House Two Hundred Fifty four Pounds Seventeen Shillings and Seven pence, and for Tools and Utensils Eighteen Pounds, Twelve Shillings and Two pence, which, three Several Sums Amounts to Four Hundred Ninety Six Pounds Eighteen Shillings and three pence.<sup>155</sup>

Given that there were costs incurred in putting people to “useful labor,” it seems certain that the public was willing to support that cost if it kept the idle and intemperate off the streets. What is interesting here too is the preponderance of women to men (thirty-eight to ten) and the presence of seven children in the Workhouse, indicating another, perhaps biased, objective of corrective labor that focused on females. While the ratio in this report seems skewed a bit in light of later estimates, it is the case that women were usually the majority of the Workhouse population. This corresponds to the official preoccupation at times with illegitimacy. The ongoing fear by officials, especially by Selectmen, of idle strangers adding to the town’s relief budget was hardly greater than the additional expense of an illegitimate child, to say nothing of the moral disapproval of that kind of pauperism.<sup>156</sup>

Thus there were logical, separate ends to each of the Overseers’ two indoor facilities. The Workhouse ethic represented a broad societal disdain for idleness and forced



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the able poor to work for their keep, in contrast to the Almshouse. While the “Rules of the Workhouse” have survived, along with an account of its original funding by private subscription, there are few ways of catching a glimpse of life inside the building and its grounds.<sup>157</sup> The Workhouse was separated from the Almshouse by the Bridewell Prison in physical alignment, just as Boston’s institutional management of poor relief and deviance was clearly subdivided in a system that distinguished care of the deserving poor to correction of the idle poor to penal incarceration for criminals including the criminal poor. Overseers committed the idle poor or troublemakers among the deserving poor to the Workhouse directly from the streets or from the Almshouse by transfer. There inmates were reformed, or at least punished or corrected, and put to work at any number of trades, including spinning and leatherwork. The majority of inmates were women and they usually ended up with the menial task of “picking oakum” from old rope, that is, separating loose fibers to be sold for caulking, with an end to supporting their own rehabilitation.

While inmates of the Workhouse technically were not criminals, they were in fact kept at the pleasure of the Overseers and subject to severe corporal punishment for indiscipline. In 1748 the original 1735 rules were revised to allow for more “oversight” and correction. In addition to the earlier practice of thrice weekly sermons to the inmates, a practice repeated in the Almshouse, Overseers were obliged to take a turn in the physical management of the Workhouse, each for a week in sequence, “to Visit the House as often as may be, at least three times in each Week for inspecting the management of it & the behaviour of the persons in it.” This same Town Meeting revision also recommended “That the Overseers at their Monthly meeting or the Committee of Overseers be further Impowered to Punish such Persons as shall be legally Committed to the House and who shall threaten or attempt to make their Escape therefrom, or such as having Escaped shall be again so committed by fixing a Wooden Clog with an Iron Chain to one of the Legs of such Offenders.”<sup>158</sup> That kind of supervision was not necessary in the Almshouse, of course, but the supervisory authority of the Overseers in the Workhouse was an interesting example of their “penal” duties, sanctioned by the town under the sovereignty of the General Court.

The Workhouse never paid its way; it was maintained by necessity to reflect the eighteenth-century distinction between alms and relief on the one hand and idleness as moral failure on the other. That distinction was marked by the attempts by Boston clergymen and merchants just before the Revolution to collaborate with civic officials to fund private variations of the public Workhouse.<sup>159</sup> Meanwhile, the steady stream of people coming and going between the two institutions under the signature of the Overseers was an example of an ongoing effort to determine the status of some cases as “deserving poor” and others not. In all of 1759, for example, some thirteen persons were sent from the Almshouse to the Workhouse, not an unusual figure in the administration of the poor. By the 1790s, however, these kinds of transfers had increased in frequency and volume. In one case in 1794, for example, thirteen men were sent as a group to the Workhouse to make room in the Almshouse for the transfer of eight women from the Workhouse. It seems that the Overseers could find

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no room in the Almshouse for some deserving poor women and culled some disruptive males from the Almshouse to make room for them. As for the reputation of the Workhouse in the 1790s, it is tempting to see the six women who ran away together from the Almshouse in September 1790 as doing so to avoid the Workhouse regimen. It seems that the Workhouse was much more difficult to run away from than was the Almshouse.<sup>160</sup> In 1741 there had been fifty-five persons, including thirty-eight women, in the Workhouse. Half a century later, two surviving manuscript lists of female oakum pickers in the Workhouse in 1794 and 1796 indicate a similar population in the building, including twenty-five women who were assigned each day to pick oakum. Of those, as few as four and as many as twelve would be missing each day because of sickness or because they were baking, cleaning, or caring for the sick or the young. Many were simply marked “absent.” If thirty-eight women is a reasonable number to expect in the Workhouse in the 1790s, then about twelve were usually spared from having to pick oakum. Pregnant and elderly women would likely have been excused from the oakum tables on a full-time basis, but in that case it is difficult to see why such women would be sent to or kept in the Workhouse if not to work, unless, of course, these women were deemed unfit for moral or behavioral reasons to be kept in the Almshouse. We may account for the discrepancy between the potential for thirty-eight residents and the twenty to twenty-eight who show up on the lists by supposing that those not assigned to pick oakum had other tasks assigned to them. A considerable amount of batch cooking had to be done, according to the fixed dietary orders, and that is one task that was not routinely assigned to oakum pickers. There were spinning wheels in the Workhouse where inmates could spin for commercial sale, as had happened from time to time before the Revolution; and while there is no documentary evidence of women in the Workhouse being assigned to either full-time cooking or spinning, it is likely that a few of the inmates were, in fact occupied full-time in either the spinning room or the kitchen. Oakum pickers, on the other hand, were assigned from time to time to cleaning and baking and to tailoring, mending, and washing clothes. They were also allowed “out on liberty” or to attend “lectures” and were thus temporarily spared from productive labor. Moreover, once a week the majority of workers was assigned to a “general washing of clothes.”

It is possible that only twenty-five or thirty women were in the Workhouse at any time during 1794, and in fact, during a seven-month period in that year only a little over fifty separate names appear on the oakum-picking lists. That suggests a steady turnover of inmates, although twelve of the twenty-four women who were listed in the oakum works on May 27, 1794, were there on December 23, 1794.<sup>161</sup> Oakum recycling was the only apparent source of outside income for the women of the Workhouse, because chores such as “cleaning of Bull’s Heads” and “making soap,” routinely assigned domestic work, were effectively in-house functions. Certainly those jobs can be considered a preferred alternative to the dirty tedium of twelve hours a day, sitting at a table, picking at old rope. While the object of Workhouse incarceration was correction and supervised labor for profit, other daily occupations contributed to the self-sufficiency in food preparation and household maintenance that would be part

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of the Workhouse ethic. In addition, work such as “cleaning the men’s room” or the “hospital room,” in addition to the stairwells, kitchen, and “copper” indicates gender-specific labor, to the extent that women were assigned occasionally to wash some of the men’s clothes and always to care for the sick. The women who were ordered to do this by the female keeper of the Workhouse were also oakum pickers, and any work, in any case, was deliberately combined with discipline. Comments in the records such as “at play” denoted idleness rather than sanctioned leisure, and Eunice Edey, for example, who was noted “at play” several times was eventually “confined to Bridewell” for a day “for her wickedness.”<sup>162</sup>

We can only guess at the possible uses for the few cents a day that were earned by female inmates. In the 1790s the daily average aggregate income for those who worked with the oakum was about \$1.30 a day, or less than ten cents a day per capita. Whether or not any of this was taken back for food or other costs is not known, but if it was kept entirely for the inmate’s release, it would not have gone very far. Thus one way of seeing the piecework values is as a measure of rehabilitation, with the Workhouse in all likelihood keeping all the income from the recycled oakum. But the range of earnings and productivity was great, and the benefits for hard work cannot be inferred from the record. Elizabeth Cornish, for example, earned a total of just over eight dollars for the entire seven-month period covered by the 1794 record. Cornish was a below-average earner who was absent or sick about 25 percent of the time and was reported for idleness three times and punished once. The same Eunice Edey who was punished in Bridewell seldom earned more than four cents a day picking oakum. By contrast, workers such as Fanny Swift and Mary Haines often made more than twenty cents a day and earned on average two to four times what Cornish or Edey did. Elizabeth Farrier was capable of earning fifteen to twenty cents a day, but picked oakum on only about 60 of the 172 days she appeared in the record. Otherwise, she baked bread regularly, sometimes twice a week, and did more washing than any other woman on the list; but if any of that counted as earnings it was not recorded. Elizabeth Leach was reported three times as “taking off to take care of Negroes in Bridewell.”<sup>163</sup> Clearly, she was ordered to do so, but if she was compensated for being absent from the oakum crew it was not noted. In any case, there is no clear evidence that the harder-working women were released from the Workhouse earlier than the loafers.

Illness and disability were common, and up to six women reported sick each day. Some were chronically ill, such as Sally Stone, who was “subject to fits” and worked only a few days during several weeks on the list. Her name was nevertheless kept active. Similarly, Ann Cox seldom picked oakum, “being lame in one of her feet,” but she too was kept on the list. Like sickness, death was never far away in this institution, and several deaths are mentioned or alluded to in the Workhouse lists for 1794. None of the women workers appears to have died in this period, but two children of inmates did, and Sally Kemp and her daughter, both inmates, lost their husband and father respectively in the Workhouse.<sup>164</sup> The death of Mr. Kemp and the oblique references in the Workhouse records to other male inmates reminds us of the frustrating gap in our knowledge of what the few men in the Workhouse did for a living or

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for occupational punishment or reform or subsistence. Whatever it was, shoemaking, tailoring, or laboring, there is no doubt that women did all or most of the routine and heavy domestic chores, in addition to the dirty and tedious job of picking oakum.

The Workhouse inmates rested on Sundays, of course, and it may be that they were preached to in the house, as they were from time to time in the Almshouse. Work was suspended also for militia training days, for reasons that are unclear, and on public election days. Indeed, it appears that there were also elections among the inmates, possibly for various supervisory positions, or for specific functions such as child care, and those too resulted in rest days. Thanksgiving Day was observed on the third Thursday of November 1794, and on July 4 of that year the Workhouse was reported as “Vacant, by reason of the North American Independency,” on what had become, by then, a formal American holiday, suggesting that the inmates were allowed out en masse, under supervision, to celebrate with the general population.<sup>165</sup> For all that, discipline was the primary function of the Workhouse regime, and there are examples of corporal punishment and removal to the town prison. While there is no way of making precise comparisons of the disciplinary methods and punishments of 1738 and those of 1794, it seems that the regulations of 1738 were not significantly softened over time. In fact, it appears from the 1790s evidence, as scant as it is, that the original supervisory orders were still being enforced.

The amount of absenteeism that appears to have been tolerated, and the varied work assignments and incomes, indicate some flexibility or pragmatism in the management of the Workhouse and are faint suggestions of incentives. But in the end the Workhouse was intended to mark off the undeserving poor from other kinds of needy people. As sparse as the Workhouse records are for this period, they make clear the distinction between the coerced labor that served as reform for Workhouse inmates and the care and communalism offered in the Almshouse.

Some people clearly fell into disorder in the Almshouse, or conversely were reformed by the Workhouse. But it is the image of the Workhouse and not the Almshouse that has endured and that the modern mind imagines when it thinks of the “poorhouse.” That may result in no small measure from the influence of British Victorian sentimentalists and from the fiction of Charles Dickens and others, and in a practical way from the actual American imitation of the English models depicted in the literature. In the United States the public poorhouse was invented in the age of Jackson, but the model was taking shape before then. The model for Josiah Quincy’s beloved House of Industry in the 1820s is not the Almshouse but the Workhouse.

Indeed, by 1813 the Overseers were becoming more aware of that possibility and were having great difficulty in maintaining the Almshouse for alms alone. Rising levels of crime, transiency, idleness and social flux in a fast-rising population put enormous strains on Boston’s public infrastructure. In 1813 the Overseers approached the Town Meeting with a desperate plea to build a new separate Workhouse, “which may also serve as a house of Correction” in order to maintain the integrity of the Almshouse as a refuge rather than the sequestered catchall that it had become for a medley of criminals, drunks, misfits and the mentally disturbed. The Overseers remarked on a

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“Catalogue of wretchedness” where “debauched and profligate persons” might mingle with the deserving poor and needy, and where resident idle criminals “vitiating and debasing each other by their language and example” were threatening to overwhelm the Almshouse. That same 1813 report notes that in the Almshouse there were “403 persons of which 283 are old people, invalids, children &c—50 sick persons in the hospital rooms, 20 insane persons, affected in various degrees, some go at large, others are in close confinement, 50 persons employed at work, some well disposed & able of body, but above ten of them are subject for a bridewell or house of correction and are locked up.”<sup>166</sup> As the nineteenth century progressed the various subdivisions of need would indeed find specialized institutions, from orphanages to insane asylums, but there would be no communal refuge like the Almshouse, and certainly there would be little or no public outdoor relief.<sup>167</sup>

As for the old Almshouse, its communal nature lay in sharp contrast to what the Overseers of 1813 described and that becomes evident in the way some of the records report births, deaths, and even a few marriages in the house itself. In the records, the only period of the eighteenth century in which births, deaths, and the ages of those admitted were systematically recorded was in the 1760s. For the rest of the record vital statistics are recorded sporadically if at all. But between 1756 and 1771 the Overseers listed 120 births in the Almshouse: as few as 3 and as many as 17 births a year, though in ten of the years the number was steady between 6 and 10 births. Between 1758 and 1774 they reported 424 deaths. A sample of 554 names in the 1758 to 1774 record gives us a rough idea of the age distribution of the inmates.<sup>168</sup>

Ages (years)	number	percentage
0–5	39	7%
6–15	50	9%
16–30	108	19%
31–59	208	38%
60–69	82	15%
70 and over	67	12%

Births and deaths were not merely incidental to Almshouse management but were integral to its *raison d’être*. Needy women went into the Almshouse to have children because it was a safe place to do so and had been established in part for that purpose. The admission of four pregnant “camp women” in 1758 has to be seen against the backdrop of the Seven Years War and may identify women who were part of the camp life of a militarized community. Thirty years later, several years after the Revolutionary War had ended “a soldiers drap [likely drab]” that is, a prostitute was admitted during a week that saw several other women, an “Irish” male and two children entering the Almshouse. Eight children on average were born each year in the Almshouse and it is difficult to estimate how many of those were illegitimate, but some were identified as such. Chistian Isbister, for example, was admitted as a town charge five times to the Almshouse between 1760 and 1771 and four times gave birth. Little more is known about her, but none of her children appear to have been bound out, indicating

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that her children were perhaps legitimate and that she had some home or family in town where she could care for them when she was discharged. Mary McGowan (or McGown), on the other hand, gave birth to three children in the Almshouse, and all three were bound out to service by the Overseers. The Edward McGown who was with Mary in the 1756 Almshouse census can be assumed to be her husband, and she named her third Almshouse birth Edward in 1761. Being married, however, did not stop Mary McGowan from binding out her children. The other side of those births is the death rate for infants in the Almshouse. Ten of the 120 children born in the Almshouse according to the record are reported to have died, some clearly stillborn or shortly after birth, and one identified as two years old. But the Almshouse was likely safer than some of the options open to pregnant needy women. Those mortality rates are within the range of the larger population for this period.<sup>169</sup>

For the entire period under review the women admitted to the Almshouse with children but no accompanying male constituted 13 percent of all adult females, declining from an average of 18 percent in the early period to about 8 percent by 1800. That corresponds to the steep decline in the overall numbers of children who went into the Almshouse. There are cases of women running away or being discharged and leaving their children behind to be indentured. In a few cases children were bound out while their mothers remained resident, but most women who came in with children or who bore children in the Almshouse left with them. In the case of children who were admitted without parents (some 15 percent of all admissions in the 1760s, declining to about 8 percent in the 1790s), almost all were bound out. It was often the case that those children, a substantial part of the Almshouse population at any time, were in the house in the first place to await an indenture, but there were also abandoned children to care for, and several cases of foundlings are recorded in the admissions lists. In the period 1775–78 there was a noticeable increase in the numbers of children admitted to the Almshouse without a corresponding increase in the numbers of indentures. It might have been the case that the disruptions of the Revolutionary War created the need for temporary or short-term care for children whose parents were split up by either military service or evacuation.<sup>170</sup>

The great disruptions of 1775–76 in Boston resulted in the movement of large numbers of people, of all classes, including the poor and the aged, as well as ill or infirm persons of all ages. As noted, in the 1770s there are entries in the records of groups of sixteen and seventeen and twenty-one people being admitted, and one group of thirty-two persons being discharged, all without much comment, although the impact of the war made refugees of large numbers of people.<sup>171</sup> Children were especially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of eighteenth-century life, and those in the Almshouse were not exempt from physical or emotional injury, illness, or loss. There were constant examples of children dying from smallpox, and the several recorded cases of children being orphaned while in the Almshouse are reminders of the fragile health and circumstances of some families. An Almshouse clerk's dispassionate note of November 12, 1759, on the virtual collapse of a family speaks volumes on the misfortune of some: The father, Richard Bill, had been sent to the Workhouse on

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October 30, one of two children “was drowned in the yard well” on February 20, 1762, and Polly Bill, either the remaining child or the mother, “dyed of the smallpox” on April 13, 1764.<sup>172</sup>

Smallpox was the great scourge of the eighteenth century. Between 1702 and 1792 Boston saw eight major epidemics (there had been four in the seventeenth century). There were many other smaller, limited outbreaks, and occasional infections throughout. The disease was reported and recorded with dread from the earliest recorded epidemic, in 1649, until far into the nineteenth century—so much so that there was better statistical reporting of smallpox in the period prior to 1790 than there was for any other population statistic.<sup>173</sup> The Overseers’ role in smallpox treatment and control merged most acutely with the responsibilities of the Selectmen. The Overseers had control of the great quarantine hospital, also known as the Well House or Pesthouse, first on Spectacle Island in Boston Harbor in 1717 and after 1737 on Rainsford’s Island. Although there was a town hospital and at least one private hospital in Boston in the second half of the eighteenth century, any sign of smallpox in the Almshouse led quickly to a transfer to Rainsford’s Island.<sup>174</sup>

Throughout its history the Almshouse was as much a hospital as it was a home for the poor. It was certainly a hospice for the old and dying and was perhaps the only designated common maternity hospital in Boston in an era when all births were at home. As noted, in the Almshouse, and Workhouse too, there was always an attending doctor, appointed and funded by the Overseers. The frequent references to people who were “sick and poor” or “old and poor” or “old and sick” amplify the caring and medical concerns of the Almshouse keepers. Unlike the systematic segregation of “Colored” in the 1801 Almshouse, the 1756 census suggests that the old Almshouse’s rooms were racially integrated, and there is some evidence that the Overseers were colorblind in their administration of the town poor and sick: “a blind negro” or a “negro woman old & infirm” were as likely to be admitted on their own recognizance as was the aged slave of a local family, in the case of “Jane [aged seventy-five] a negro of Mrs Tyfield” being received in all likelihood to be cared for after becoming too infirm to perform as a houseservant. She died six months later. Those entries are found among admissions for white poor admitted in the same year (1775) as “blind” or “aged” or “Deaf & Dumb” or “an old Woman.” All were admitted by order of a single Overseer.<sup>175</sup>

Selectmen too were integral to the administration of poor relief in Boston. Their role, however, was most clearly a senior administrative one in the hierarchy of civic politics, and their most crucial authority was in the primary determination of civic budgets, including poor relief. While taxes were nominally the purview of the Town Meeting as a whole, the influence of Selectmen, and through them the Overseers, was great when it came to setting rates. In a more tangible way, Selectmen were most responsible for the poor and needy who were not legal residents of Boston. As noted, the law required that two Selectmen had to authorize the admission of “strangers” to the Almshouse, with the consent and approval of an Overseer. In the period 1764–68 the Selectmen recorded seventy-five requests for relief including the

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following, which are typical of the hundreds of examples that occur throughout the Selectmen's minutes for the eighteenth century:

Mr Greenleaf one of the Overseers acquainted the Selectmen that he had sent into the Almshouse one Michael Carney, who fell into a Cistern and is distracted, and cannot tell whence he came. Mr Greenleaf further informs that George Crist, John Henry Rainghee & Christopher Perver, supposed to have come from Broad Bay are sick & in necessitous Circumstances, and require relief.... Mr Farmer [the Almshouse keeper] was directed to receive into Alms house by Mr Sewall & Hancock one Richard Barrett a Stranger disordered in Mind & destitute of the means of subsistance.<sup>176</sup>

Examples of compassion by the Selectmen also occur in the Almshouse admissions lists. "A Molatto Child Picked up In ye Common street, we have Called it Clarica," was sent in at state expense by the Selectmen although the "we" who named the child were probably the Almshouse keepers (usually a married couple). Another state charge, Jane Sigourey, "A Molatto Garl about 11 years old And no Covenant Servant As she sais," was ordered into the Almshouse by the Selectmen in 1788 and later bound out by the Overseers.<sup>177</sup>

Displays of compassion extended beyond age, race, and domicile. Even former enemies were offered alms, and several former British soldiers and their dependents could be found in the Almshouse in the 1780s. Workhouse inmates who needed constant medical attention or pregnant women were usually transferred in the short term at least to the Almshouse. Some clearly "distracted" Workhouse occupants were sent over to the Almshouse, for either their own protection or because they were no longer considered "idle poor." Conversely, the Overseers were notably intolerant of unruly Almshouse inmates, and there are many examples of "distracted" persons being sent over to the Workhouse. The truly disruptive were simply cast out of the Almshouse, as in the case of Patrick Shanley in 1789. The Almshouse keeper, in a fit of phonetic indignation, remarked: "I think [Shanley] ye most troublisom Man that Ever has ben in ye hous sence I have ben hear[;] a drunken Quarrelson fiteinging decriped Rech As I Know of." It is not clear how long Shanley had been upsetting the Almshouse peace, but this rare marginal comment by the keeper indicates how little tolerance there was for drinking and fighting in the Almshouse. Yet even Shanley, in need, was readmitted in April 1790.<sup>178</sup>

Finally, the Almshouse of the later eighteenth century, while it can be seen as a relic of institutional poor relief soon to be swept away by nineteenth-century reform, also reflects what later seemed to be quaint attitudes in a rapidly changing social environment. The remnants of the Puritans' paternalistic ethic would later come to be attacked as repressive. Also, the "amateurs" of poor relief administration, the Overseers, tolerated and even encouraged the coexistence in one openly communal building of vagrant African Americans, Italians, Spaniards and Native Americans, ninety-two-year-old homeless and destitute people, illegitimate and abandoned children, nuclear families, unemployed craftsmen, and solvent geriatrics. The question of why is perhaps



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best answered by first thinking of “alms” as a cultural value with long roots rather than as a sociological definition. The Overseers practiced a formal almsgiving, while the churches of Boston often ranted against the moral corruption of supporting idleness with public funds. Some sermon literature of the 1750s and 1760s reads like an attack on all the poor, and not just the “idle” poor.<sup>179</sup> The Almshouse population, as a mix of the destitute and the solvent, demonstrated a remarkable example of institutional as well as social tolerance. Its diverse sets of inmates appear to have cohabited without a great deal of strain. Classes and races mixed freely, it seems. The Almshouse, then, was emphatically not a “poorhouse” in the nineteenth-century American sense of only paupers in a workhouse facility, when needy children were isolated in orphanages and pregnant single women, the elderly, and the infirm were each kept in specialized institutions.<sup>180</sup>

A vivid example of the diverse social composition of the Almshouse contrasts the lists of indentured children and references to blind, lame, and destitute “negroes” with four elderly and ill but apparently solvent Bostonians who entered the Almshouse in the 1760s for care and who died there, three of them after a few months and the other after a year and a half of residence. The inventories of George Skinner, Mary Crawford, Thomas Eastwick, and Mary Pilsberry have survived in the Overseers records. Their possessions indicate a socioeconomic range within the group and invite the speculation that inmates did make themselves at home in the Almshouse. The most middle-class of the four was clearly George Skinner, whose substantial inventory shows some refinement as well as a little affluence. Skinner came into the Almshouse on April 27, 1762 and died there in November 1763. His inventory of furnishings, clothing, and accessories included a feather bed, chairs, rugs, a coffee pot, delft bowls, silver spoons and buckles, a quarto bible, and a few books. He also brought in two wigs, two cloaks, two jackets, two coats, a walking cane, and a good deal more. Not only would Mr. Skinner’s possessions fill one of the Almshouse rooms, it represented some material quality.<sup>181</sup>

Another entry stated that “Mary Pilsberry came into the house Wednesday May 5, 1762 and brought with her Only The Cloaths on her Back the rest of her things as Household Stuff, Bed & Bedding being in the possession of Benj<sup>a</sup> Austin Esqr [an Overseer]--since settled.” Mary Pilsberry died on May 8, 1762. A third entry for a Mrs. Crawford states that she came into the house on February 14, 1763 and brought with her the following “Things or Household Stuff &c” including two tables, a bedstead, and two trunks of clothes. Her belongings were far less extensive and considerably inferior in value to those of Skinner but she did have means. Mary Crawford died on April 26, 1763, two months after being admitted. Finally: “Thomas Eastwick came into the House March 26, 1763 and Brot with him: A Feather Bed, Pillow, Two Blankets, And a Chest & Box containing Wearing Apparel Bedstead left behind at the desire of Mr Childs who he hired his Room of---.” Mr. Eastwick died on June 25, 1763. Even Mrs. Crawford’s and Mr. Eastwick’s meager belongings, and certainly the relative opulence of Skinner’s, are not what one might expect in what we might think of as a poorhouse. Yet they were all at home in the Almshouse. Also,



as well as inmates with material means, the Almshouse was home in the eighteenth century to Bostonians with status. Doctor Jasper York in 1764 and Doctor Patrick Larey in 1770 were admitted in need. Benjamin Smith, a jeweler, was admitted in April 1765 “to be cured of the itch.” A genealogist might probe the backgrounds of inmates with names such as Dolbeare, Scollay, Palfrey, Bangs, Greenleaf, Proctor, and Bulfinch to see if they have family connections to the middle- and upper-class Boston Selectmen, Overseers and merchants with those names. Coincidence or imitation was clearly the reason for inmates with names such as John Adams and George Washington to appear in the records.<sup>182</sup>

Thus a clear consistency of purpose and administrative practices emerges from the Almshouse admissions records into the early nineteenth century, but trends in the social composition of the Almshouse population do occur toward the end of the period. Then, higher rates of internal migration and the increase in the proportion of state to town charges indicate a clear shift in the demographics of Massachusetts. The warning-out lists bear that out. Another significant trend emerges in the increase in single-person admissions to the Almshouse in the late 1780s and early 1790s. A more modest trend, quantitatively, is the increasing numbers of African Americans in the Almshouse following the constitutional end of slavery in Massachusetts. In the 1790s there appear to be more examples of destitution than of middle-class elderly seeking rest and care. In 1795 and 1796, for example, four “molatto” children were admitted having been “Found at ye door” or “in ye Street” or “in ye shed.”<sup>183</sup>

The admissions records of the Overseers from late 1758 to 1800 are included here in their entirety because they are nearly complete in volume and sequence and represent the longest sustained record in the eighteenth-century Overseers manuscript collection. The thousands of names that appear in this record must be viewed against the backdrop of fundamental transformations in the political, social, and economic history of Massachusetts, and especially as they illuminate the twilight era of the Almshouse. The urban face of Boston was redrawn after the 1790s more rapidly than it had ever been in the past. As this record closes in the early nineteenth-century the slow diminution of the authority of the Overseers of the Poor and their most significant instrument, the Almshouse, had begun. The Overseers’ pleas of 1813 reveal, as well as any other index, the great changes to Boston’s public welfare system that were now underway. Even though the statute of 1692 had been confirmed in the acts of 1793 and 1794, the Overseers’ days as arbiters of relief were numbered. More important, the age of institutional alms would soon be over.<sup>184</sup>

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- 1 John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity" in *Winthrop Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society [hereafter cited as MHS], (Boston: 1929–47), 2:282.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 295. See the discussion of the interplay of clerical and lay authority and the realistic expectations of the first generation of Massachusetts clergy in Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991), 138–75; Timothy H. Breen and Stephen Foster, "The Puritans Greatest Achievement: A Study in Social Cohesion in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Massachusetts," *Journal of American History*, 60 (1973); 5–22. *The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts, Reprinted from the Edition of 1672, With the Supplements through 1686* (Boston, 1887), esp. 37, 44.
- 3 On the Tudor origins of early seventeenth-century American poor relief, see Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988), especially 113–37. See also the superb bibliographical material in Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999). On the transfer and adaption of English law to the American colonies see the brief but comprehensive treatment in Peter Charles Hoffer, *Law and People in Colonial America* (Baltimore, 1992), especially Chapter 1. For a specific reference to Massachusetts, see David Grayson Allen, *In English Ways: The Movement of Societies and the Transferal of English Local Law and Custom to Massachusetts in the Seventeenth Century* (Boston, 1981). Another treatment of this ongoing question can be found in Darrett B. Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston: Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630–1649* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1965), 51–67 and 202–40. The same author's views on "adaptation" can be found in the reissue of some of his earlier work in *Small Worlds, Large Questions: Explorations in Early American Social History, 1600–1850* (Charlottesville, Va., 1994), especially chapters 4 and 5. See also appendix I.
- 4 On the 1632 prison, see Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England* (Boston, 1853–54) I, 100. What is clear from this literature, and from Massachusetts Bay Company statutes such as the 1641 Body of Liberties, is the sanctity of civil authority in relation to the religious ends of Puritan settlement. See also Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston*, 159–60. The Massachusetts settlement was not a "theocracy" as we think of that term, but a well-ordered civic enterprise.
- 5 When Josiah Quincy Jr. recommended a major reform of Boston's poor relief system in 1821, he based his attack on what he saw as misguided public policy compounded by the manipulation of the system by "contented" recipients of poor relief. On the issue of what he called the "abuse of public charities" he quotes approvingly from an English report that "establishes the principle ... that the existence of any permanent fund for the support of the poor, the appropriation of any revenue ... has, upon the whole, a direct tendency to increase their numbers [in a way that is] directly productive of paupers." Josiah Quincy Jr., *Report of the Committee on the Pauper Laws of this Commonwealth* [Boston, 1821], 6; hereafter cited as *Quincy Report*. See also Quincy's *Municipal History of the town and city of Boston ... 1630–1830* (Boston, 1852), 24–38, 47–53, 170–75. This great review of Quincy's career masquerading as history contains 41 pages on the first 192 years of Boston's history, and 401 pages on Quincy's revolutionary role in its history between 1822 and 1830. A very good study of Quincy's role in the popular politics of the early nineteenth-century is Matthew H. Crocker, *The Magic of the Many: Josiah Quincy and the Rise of Mass Politics in Boston, 1800–1830* (Boston, 1999), especially pages 132–48. Robert A. McCaughey, *Josiah Quincy, 1772–1864: The*

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*Last Federalist* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974) is not only a useful personal portrait of Quincy but a very astute political biography and its chapters on Quincy's role as mayor are balanced and insightful.

Quincy's caveats in some way anticipate the entire debate on poor relief in the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries. The massive public attacks on poverty in the twentieth century, beginning with the Progressives' reforms but most notably in the New Deal and Great Society programs, have served mostly to confirm poverty's permanence and the constant opposition to taxes for poor relief. John Kenneth Galbraith succinctly notes the reasons why the majority in postindustrial America can tolerate permanent classes of poor in *The Culture of Contentment* (Boston, 1993), 13. The best treatment of poverty and poor relief in the twentieth century is James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle against Poverty, 1900–1994*, 3d ed., (Cambridge, Mass., 1994). A very accessible review of the subject for the nineteenth century is Robert H. Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (New York, 1965). There is no comparable book-length survey of poverty and public relief for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Of the article literature see especially Billy G. Smith, "Poverty and Economic Marginality in Eighteenth Century America," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 132 (1988); 85–115. Smith has some very useful observations and analyses on some of the issues and material dealt with in this introduction.

- 6 Geoffrey Taylor, *The Problem of Poverty, 1660–1834* (London, 1969), 3.
- 7 The Gregory King tables are reprinted in a great number of modern studies, but see the full essay in Gregory King, *Naturall and Political Observations, upon the State and Condition of England*, [1696], ed. G. Barnett (Baltimore, 1936). There is a useful comment on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century context of this debate, with special significance for colonial America, in Stephen E. Wiberley Jr., "Four Cities: Public Poor Relief in Urban America, 1700–1775" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1975), 57–60, 220–21. This thesis deserves to be more widely known for its treatment of the Overseers of the Poor in the cities it covers.
- 8 Paul Slack, *The English Poor Law, 1531–1782* (London, 1990), 9–10, and Slack, *Policy and Poverty*, 113ff. Allen, *In English Ways*, passim; *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts*, I: 64–68; *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, passim.
- 9 Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty* (London, 1984), 3–31. The quote is from 24–25. Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement*, pp. 5–28, 150ff, makes a strong case for the steady secularization of charity in England after the seventeenth century. See also Slack, *English Poor Law*, 35–58; and Allen, *In English Ways*.
- 10 See *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 66 (1633 and 1668) for idleness, and pp. 44, 123 (1639) for "poor." The 1639 law (p. 44) states: "It is ordered by this Court and Authoritie therof; that any Shire court, or any two magistrates out of court shall have power to determin all differences about lawfull setling, and providing for poor persons: and shall have power to dispose of all unstled persons into such towns as they shall judge to be most fit for the maintainance, imployment of such persons and families for the ease of the cuntry." The 1639 act was included in *The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts, 1648 edition* (reprint; Cambridge, Mass., 1929). See also Josiah Benton, *Warning Out in New England, 1656–1817* (Boston, 1911). On Rhode Island, see Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625–1742* (1938; reprint London, 1971), 80–81. On English law see Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, chapter 4; Jutte, *Poverty and Deviance*, 120–24; and D. M. Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth: England under the Later Tudors, 1547–1603* (New York, 1983), 123–29. I am grateful to Professor William Rorabaugh of the University of Washington for his comments on the Elizabethan Statutes and their influence on American colonial apprenticeship and servitude. See also Lawrence William Towner, "A Good Master Well Served: A Social History of Servitude in Massachusetts, 1620–1750" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern, 1955), chapters 1–3, and appendices.

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- 11 *Reports of the Record Commissioners for the City of Boston*, 39 volumes (Boston, 1876–1909), (hereafter cited as *Boston Records*) 7:206, for March 9, 1690/1: “The 4 ouerseers together with the Town Treasurer are desired and apoynted a Committee to drawe up & present unto the Generall Court such proposalls as they shall apprehend needfull for the orderinge and improving of them, to imploy and set the poore a worke.” See also Robert Seybolt, *The Town Officials of Colonial Boston, 1634–1775* (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), 81.
- 12 Manuscript records of the Overseers of the Poor, 1733–1925, 14 boxes, microfilmed, indexed, and dated, MHS, Boston (hereafter *Overseers*). The entire manuscript collection has been catalogued, with a very good commentary on content, as “Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733–1925: Guide to the Manuscript Collection” (Massachusetts Historical Society, 27 September 1988; hereafter cited as “Guide”). Most of the eighteenth-century manuscripts are in boxes 1 and 9 (microfilms 1 and 8). While these records are known to scholars and have been consulted, the only full treatment of them so far is Wiberley, 160–97. Wiberley has produced superb analyses from part of the Boston Overseers collection, up to 1775, and is the only scholar so far to have examined the eighteenth-century manuscripts extensively. Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), and Smith, “Poverty and Economic Marginality” both refer to the Wiberley dissertation.
- 13 *Boston Records* 1:15–19; 11:104, 114; 15:274–76; 20:198–200. Samuel Whitwell, “Overseer of the Poor Account Book, 1769–1791,” MHS, (hereafter Whitwell, “Account Book”) indicates some three hundred ward disbursements a year. His own disbursements were over fifty in some years; see Wiberley, 167. Boston’s wards are illustrated very well in Page’s 1777 map, which is published in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *Atlas of Early American History: The Revolutionary Era, 1760–1790* (Princeton, N.J., 1976). Under the direction of the tough-minded town treasurer of the 1750s, David Jeffries, the terms were greatly clarified for charging the Town of Boston for the care of its poor by others. For example, a pro forma of the 1750s looked liked the following: “Whereas Mr A.B. of C has received into his House D.E. a poore Wooman belonging to the Town of Boston, We the Subscribers Overseers of the Poor of sd Town hereby oblige oure selves ... at all Times to save Harmless the sd Town of Woburn from any charge that may aris by sd D.E. being their, and will receive her again at any time when desired by sd A.B.” (*Overseers*, box 1, folder 2).  
Where split dates appear in the manuscripts they have been retained throughout the transcription record and the commentary. Bostonians customarily followed English practice, and until 1752 the Anglo-American calendar year ended on March 25. Thus a date between January 1 and March 24 would be given either as 1735/36 (Old Style) or 1736 (New Style). After 1752, the Old Style calendar year was abandoned and the Anglo-American year, which was then eleven days longer than the rest of Europe, was fixed at 365 days with the year starting on January 1.
- 14 Most of the 39 volumes of the *Boston Records* contain indexed examples of this relationship. Volume 12 records a great many examples of the close relations between the Town Meeting and the Overseers. The Selectmen’s minutes in volumes 11, 17, and 21 are indexed for Overseers matters. See also appendix 1 of this collection.
- 15 See, for example, *Boston Records*, 20:198–201.
- 16 On population figures, see Lemuel Shattuck, *Report to the Committee of the City Council Appointed to Obtain the Census of Boston for the year 1845* (Boston, 1846), 2–6. On the Almshouse and Workhouse populations see *Boston Records*, 15:369. The figures used here are averages drawn from Overseers, boxes 1, 9, 13, and from the Whitwell “Account Book” for 1770 and 1771.
- 17 The thesis that voluntary private charity is a postrevolutionary phenomenon is argued with considerable effectiveness in Conrad Wright, *The Transformation of Charity in Postrevolutionary New England* (Boston, 1992). “Pauperism” in the mid-nineteenth century is discussed by the significant

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- contemporaneous researches of Lemuel Shattuck, 100–112. Shattuck's figures support Wright's thesis that a substantial amount of poor relief in the first half of the nineteenth century was private. There was not necessarily a major change in attitudes toward the poor, or in the simple traditional dual distinction between the worthy and unworthy poor. More of the poor were treated "indoors," in institutions, even though more of the poor were subject to private and increasingly evangelical relief. On that development see Sheila Anne Culbert, "Sturdy Beggars and the Worthy Poor: Poverty in Massachusetts, 1750–1820" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1985). In a way that both complements and advances the chronology of Wiberley, this study is by far the most comprehensive treatment of the subject of public poor relief in Massachusetts in this period and concludes that definitions of the various kinds of poor relief recipients, and the laws that governed the process, were constant over the course of the century after 1750. Culbert's broader social context means that she deals in less depth with Boston than does Wiberley, but she fashions a very useful rural-urban comparison. Her extended time frame allows her to discuss, in her chapter 4, the context of the *Quincy Report*, which should be read in addition to Thomas O'Connor, "To be Poor and Homeless in Olde Boston," paper read at the New England and the Early Republic Conference, Boston, May 18, 1990. McCaughey, *Josiah Quincy*, Chapter 7 has useful comments on the contemporary perceptions of the specter of rapidly rising pauperism in Massachusetts in the 1820s. It is well documented by now that the 1790s was a crucial decade in the urban transformation of Boston that culminated in the 1822 city charter. The decade was marked by serious social issues that resulted from an economic boom. That boom put great pressure on Boston's infrastructure. See Jacqueline Barbara Carr, "A Change 'As Remarkable As the Revolution': Boston's demographics, 1780–1800," *NEQ* 73 (2000) 583–602, and the references to Boston in Carole Shammas, "The Space Problem in United States Cities," *WMQ* 57 (2000): 505–42.
- 18 Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*: 81; *Boston Records* 7: 157–58; on Keayne's charitable motives see Bernard Bailyn, "The Apologia of Robert Keayne," *WMQ*, 7 (1950): 568–87.
- 19 *Boston Records* 1:78. Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston*, 202–40. Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 74–75. On the way that the poor were cared for out of doors in the seventeenth century, see Charles Richard Lee, "This Poor People: Poverty, Relief, and Correction in Massachusetts, 1620–1715" (Ph.D. diss., SUNY Buffalo, 1978). Lee traces the evolution away from redemptive charity and casual poor relief to a more institutional approach, with less rehabilitative expectation. His chapter 7 is instructive. Wiberley, 67–68, has some succinct comments on the term "poorhouse" in the eighteenth-century. On Bridewell, see *Boston Records* 8:174–75. The Bridewell was included in Bonner's 1722 map of "The Town of Boston." The term "Bridewell" was a generic term for free-standing prisons (gaols) and survived in usage in some parts of the English-speaking world into the nineteenth-century. The original Bridewell had been a building for training Tudor apprentices that evolved into a house of correction and was named for the district in London where it was located. The quotes are from Annie Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston, 1630–1822* (Boston, 1920), 222–3.
- 20 Robert Jutte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, England, 1994), 100–104. Stuart Woolf, *The Poor in Western Europe in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London, 1986), 17–28. On the diversity of English population in relation to geography and poor relief see Slack, *English Poor Law*.
- 21 Edward M. Cook Jr., *The Fathers of the Towns: Leadership and Community Structure in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Baltimore, 1976). Two important studies are relevant here: Wiberley's unpublished dissertation, and Jon Christian Teaford, *The Municipal Revolution in America: Origins of Modern Urban Government, 1650–1825* (Chicago, 1975). See also the essays in Bruce Daniels, ed., *Town and County: Essays on the Structure of Local Government in the American Colonies* (Middletown, Conn., 1978).

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- 22 *Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, 37. *The Overseers Guide ...* (Brookfield, Mass., 1815), 1–33, offers a comprehensive review of settlement criteria from 1639 to 1795. See also appendix 2.
- 23 In what might be called the post-Perry Miller revision, historians continue to debate both the substance and the relevance of the Winthrop experiment and its alleged debt to or distinction from Calvinism and the English Puritan experience. Compare, for example, Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), with Miller's major works *Errand into the Wilderness*, *From Colony to Province*, and *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*. The value of social history in interpreting the founders' purposes and legacies is argued with conviction by Rutman in *Small Worlds*, xii–xiii and passim. For a recent discussion of the issue see Mark A. Peterson, "From Founding Fathers to Old-Boy Networks: The Declension of Perry Miller's Puritans," *Reviews in American History* 23 (1995): 13–19. For a sometimes refreshing alternative to the Miller school and its derivatives see the sociological E. Digby Baltzell, *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1996, originally published in 1979).
- 24 There is little evidence of boards of Overseers being constituted elsewhere in Massachusetts prior to the middle of the eighteenth century. Thereafter, Overseers appeared in the larger towns of the state, and in towns adjacent to Boston such as Charlestown, Roxbury, and Dorchester; see Culbert, "Sturdy Beggars," chapters 3 and 4. See also Louis J. Piccarello, "Social Structure and Public Welfare Policy in Danvers, Massachusetts, 1750–1850," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 118 (1982): 248–63. On the 1704 act see *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts* 1:538–39.
- 25 Meanwhile, in the vast majority of Massachusetts towns, the supervision of the idle poor and other "deviants" would continue to be done by the constables on the advice of the Selectmen, and by the latter themselves; see Culbert, "Sturdy Beggars," chapter 3. Even into the 1820s most Massachusetts towns were without freestanding "poorhouses." In addition to Culbert see David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston, 1971), 31, and *Quincy Report*.
- 26 *Overseers*, box 1, folders 1–3, and box 8, folder 3. For an example of earlier concerns about transiency see *Boston Records* 7:241, Town Meeting minutes for March 11, 1700. The record is instructive. It states: "Upon the Consideration of the great Charges this Town is at Yearly, from the Growing Numbr of Poore Amonge us & the great Number Come in amonge ous wch has been Occasioned by the Eastern warr wth the Indians, and other poor and vild persons yt has Come in amonge us from Other Towns, Our Town being so Populous and they shifting from place to place, so long before they be Descouered that the law makes them Inhabitants. Now these things do presage great Poverty to be hastening upon this Town if some sutable methods be not timely Taken to prevent the same. Upon Consideration of the things for mentioned, It was Voted that there be 500ld [500 pounds] raised upon the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, To be Layed out and improved by the Overseers of the poor & such others wch shall by the Town be added to them, as a stock to be employed for the procuring materials and Tools, To Sett and keep the poor people and Ill persons at work as the Law Directs."
- 27 Love, Robert, *Received, by order of the selectmen of Boston, Jan. 25, 1765...* MHS. Benton, *Warning Out*, chapter 1. *Acts and Resolves*, I, 64–68. See also Lawrence Towner, "The Indentures of Boston's Poor Apprentices, 1734–1805," *Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Publications* (1956–63): 417–68.
- 28 Compare, for example, the style of entry in *Overseers*, box 1, folders 1–3, and in box 9, folders, 1–2 and 4, and box 13, folder 1. For an example of one Overseer's trained hand see Whitwell, "Account Book." I am assuming that Whitwell made his own entries, but his ledgers may in fact have been compiled by a clerk-scrivener. On the way Boston's merchant or legal class learned their

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- handwriting techniques, see “William Palfrey’s Legal and Financial Papers,” Houghton Library Manuscripts, Harvard University.
- 29 Town charges tended to stay a bit longer than province or state charges. There does not appear to be a significant change in the average or typical duration of residence between the 1760s and the 1790s. While some 60 percent of the sample were gone from the Almshouse within a year that still leaves large numbers of long-term indoor poor relief recipients. See *Overseers*, box 1, folder 3 and box 8, folder 3. See also Wiberley, 33, for a sample and chart of lengths of stays prior to 1775. The L shape of the building was likely a result of the 1742 addition, which stipulated a “Brick Building ... Ninety feet long and the same Wedth of the Old House.” See *Boston Records*, 12:281.
- 30 Wiberley, chapter 2, attempts to compare the regimen of the Almshouse with the Workhouse. *Boston Records*, vol. 12, *passim*, contains specific references to the separate functions.
- 31 Seybolt, *Town Officials*; Wiberley, Chapter 6. *Overseers*, box 1, folder 2. Whitwell “Account Book,” *passim*. See the accounts in *Overseers*, box 1, folder 1.
- 32 Whitwell, “Account Book,” contains no annotation but is a superb example of the personal involvement of an Overseer in day-to-day transactions with the poor “out of doors.” See also Wiberley, 160–67, for a discussion of the Overseers’ status and conduct.
- 33 The Overseers’ own manuscript records are in the hands of the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS), but vast external references to the Overseers can be found in the published *Provincial Acts and Resolves, the Records of the House of Representatives*, the unpublished “Boston Town Papers,” at the Boston Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts and scattered among the manuscripts in the Massachusetts Archives. The multiple volumes of the *Boston Records* print the Town Meeting and Selectmen’s minutes and deliberations for the entire colonial, revolutionary and federal period. There are dozens of entries on the Overseers in each volume. These are mostly direct references such as reports by the Overseers to the Selectmen or the Town Meeting, but there are many incidental entries too. The *Boston Records* volumes are a mine of valuable material on all aspects of Boston’s history before the 1820s and are clearly indexed. For the Overseers see “Poor,” “Paupers,” “Almshouse,” “Workhouse,” “Overseers of the Poor,” or “Poor, Overseers of.” Much of the original eighteenth-century records of the Overseers themselves have been lost, as the “Guide” indicates. In fact, in the monumental Justin Winsor, editor, *Memorial History of Boston*, 4 volumes (Boston, 1881) there are occasional references to Overseers records that apparently no longer exist.
- 34 *Boston Records*. See especially the entries in *Overseers*, box 1, folders 1–4. The exception to the comment here about an absence of a serious consideration of the Overseers as historically important actors is Wiberley, and to a lesser extent, Culbert, “Sturdy Beggars.” But these two studies are unpublished. Otherwise, there is now an extensive and excellent recent historiography on poverty and social structure in eighteenth-century Boston that has grown out of the “new social history” and “New Left” or “Neoprogressive” theories of a generation ago. The subject and approaches may be gauged by reference to the following samples from the 1965–89 period: James Henretta, “Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston,” *WMQ* 22 (1965): 75–92; Alan Kulikoff “The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston,” *WMQ* 28 (1971): 375–412; Gary B. Nash, “Urban Wealth and Poverty in Pre-Revolutionary America,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (hereafter cited as *JIH*) 6 (1975–76): 547–76; “The Failure of Female Factory Labor in Colonial Boston,” *Labor History* 20 (1979): 165–88, and *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); G. B. Warden, “Inequality and Instability in Eighteenth-Century Boston, A Reappraisal,” *JIH*, 6 (1976): 585–620; and Eric G. Nellis, “Misreading the Signs: Industrial Imitation, Poverty, and The Social Order in Colonial Boston,” *NEQ*, 59 (1986): 486–507, and “The Working Poor of Pre-Revolutionary Boston,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 17 (1989): 137–59. Smith, “Poverty



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- and Economic Marginality” summarizes the general theme of these studies, which is, that America was becoming more economically stratified and inegalitarian in the second half of the eighteenth century. Warden’s article is an attempt to soften the general gloom of these theses, but there can be no doubt that the need for poor relief increased in America’s port cities after mid century. Any study of the evolution of poor relief in the eighteenth century must first address the questions raised in that literature. It may well be that the wheel of historiography has revolved to the flip side of poverty, which is wealth and capitalism. For example, James Henretta has incorporated his 1965 study into his recent book *The Origins of American Capitalism, Collected Essays* (Boston, 1991).
- 35 Lee, “This Poor People,” and Culbert, “Sturdy Beggars,” make this quite clear for their respective time periods.
- 36 In 1690 there were 7,000 residents of Boston and 50,000 in all of Massachusetts. In 1770, the ratio was 15,520 to 235,000. Thus Boston’s percentage of the province’s population fell from about 14 percent to 7 percent. Boston’s prerevolutionary population peaked at about 17,000 in the early 1740s, then declined and leveled out at about 15,500. It did not recover to its 1740 levels until the 1780s. See Shattuck, 2–6; E. B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, *American Population before the Federal Census of 1790* (New York, 1932); J. H. Benton, “Early Census Making in Massachusetts, 1643–1765: With a reproduction of the lost census of 1765,” *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, 2d ser., 4:136–39. While there was some “urban” growth outside Boston, in towns such as Salem, Marblehead, Ipswich, Newburyport, and Gloucester, Boston remained the only fully developed “urban” society in the period. See the extended discussion of “the typology of towns” in Cook, *Fathers of the Towns*, chapter 7. For rural Massachusetts see Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, “Self Sufficiency and the Agricultural Economy of Eighteenth Century Massachusetts,” *WMQ* 41 (1984): 333–64. The best source for town populations is Jacob Felt, “Statistics of Population in Massachusetts,” *Collections of the American Statistical Association*, 1 (1847): 148–57.
- 37 See Felt, 148–57 and Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 102–28, 312–38.
- 38 Nellis, “Misreading the Signs.”
- 39 On the number of churches in Boston see *Boston Records* 1:6.
- 40 Whitwell, “Account Book.” On the 1772 act see, “An Act for incorporating the Overseers,” *Overseers*, box 13, folder 1. On voluntary charity and the background to prerevolutionary philanthropy in Boston see Peter R. Virgadamo, “Colonial Charity and the National Character: Boston, 1630–1775” (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1982). I am grateful to him for the use of two unpublished essays of his: “‘To Give Alms and Do Justice’: Charles Chauncy and Early American Philanthropy,” and “Sermons and Alms: Boston’s Quarterly Charity Lecture, 1720–1776.” I agree with Dr. Virgadamo that Chauncy can be seen as philanthropic so long as the recipients of alms were not the chronic poor or the idle poor. On the rather short list of private charities see Winsor, IV:658.
- 41 Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 391–94.
- 42 *Boston Records*, 15:369.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 For an example of the link between the Overseers’ policies and the authority of the church see Charles Chauncy, *The Idle Poor Secluded from the Bread of Charity by the Christian Law: A Sermon Preached in Boston before the Society* (Boston, 1752).

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- 45 Wiberley, 88–109; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 188–90; Culbert, “Sturdy Beggars,” 125–26, 153n; the rules of the Workhouse are in *Boston Records*, 12: 235–41, and are reprinted from the manuscripts of the Overseers in appendix 4. *Boston Records* 1:78 locates the Almshouse and Workhouse sites. The term “scum” was used by Governor Bernard. See *Overseers*, Box 12, folder 1. Even if there were some racial, class, gender and age segregation, the inmates were treated as a group and were close enough to each other, that the term “mingling” is appropriate. The Almshouse census of 1756 indicates strict gender separation of single persons in the room assignments.
- 46 *Rules of Incorporation for the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor* (Boston, 1754 ed.), 2–12; Nellis, “Misreading the Signs”; Nash, “Female Labor” and *Urban Crucible*, 190ff.; Wiberley, 100–9.
- 47 “Rules and orders for the management of the Workhouse,” May 28, 1735, *Overseers*, box 13, folder 1; the quote is from an exchange between Governor Bernard and the Overseers in manuscript form in *Overseers*, box 12, folder 1. On examples of the prison population and conditions in the middle of the eighteenth century see miscellaneous bound manuscripts for 1734, 1740, 1742, and 1752, MHS. The linen manufactory building was used for a time to quarter British troops in 1768. It failed to attract a permanent textile producer and was sold by the state in 1784 to the Massachusetts Bank. It was later converted to residences in 1792 and pulled down in 1806. See the Ezekiel Price Papers in the MHS.
- 48 Lee, “This Poor People,” chapter 3, and Culbert, “Sturdy Beggars,” chapter 1, have some very thoughtful views on this.
- 49 *Boston Records* 15:235, 16:144.
- 50 See Cotton Mather, *Bonifacius: An Essay upon the Good* (Boston, 1710; reprint, ed. David Levin, Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 57–59, 74, 110, 121, and 132–37 for “reforming societies.” On Samuel Sewall see Milton H. Thomas, ed., *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674–1729* (2 volumes, New York, 1973 edition), and Seybolt, *Town Officials*, 100, 105 for Sewall’s Overseers service. See also Foster, *Long Argument*, 284.
- 51 Wiberley, 217–19. On Chauncy and Cooper see Nellis, “Misreading the Signs,” 492–93. On the rest of the cream of Boston’s merchant class who joined Hancock in his efforts to put the poor to work see *Rules of Incorporation*. For the subscribers to the 1735 fund for the workhouse see *Boston Records* 12:180–83.
- 52 “Warning Book from January 1745 to 1770,” *Overseers*, box 1, folder 1. Lawrence Towner, “The Indentures of Boston’s Poor Apprentices, 1734–1805,” *Colonial Society of Massachusetts Transactions*, 42 (1956–63): 417–68. Along with Wiberley’s dissertation and a 1958 MA thesis noted by Towner, this is the most detailed use of eighteenth-century overseers records to date. It should be noted that the indentures that were authorized by the Overseers were not retained by them but were kept as town records. The original Indentures have been preserved and are in six volumes in the Boston Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts. According to Towner these manuscripts were microfilmed, likely in the late 1950s or early 1960s, by the Institute of Early American History and Culture in Williamsburg, Virginia. See Towner, 434. Many of the indentured children went from their homes to the Almshouse and thence to service; see *Overseers*, box 9, folder 1. Age and education were among the important determinants in the occupational fate of children. W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice: From Franklin to the Machine Age in America* (New York, 1986), Preface, Prologue, and chapter 1.
- 53 *Overseers*, box 9, folders 1–4. Towner, 430. The pro forma used by the Overseers to bind out children to formal indentures is worth quoting: “We the Subscribers of the Town of [blank] do

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hereby recommend Mr. [blank] as a person of sober life & conversation & in good Circumstances & further Certify that both he & his wife are suitable persons to be intrusted with the education of any Child which may be bound to them as an apprentice.”

- 54 *Overseers*, box 1, folder 1–2. There is a need for a more specific study of women as paupers and as the major focus of institutionalized poor relief. Gary Nash in “Female Labor” and *Urban Crucible*, esp. 189–96, has offered some guidance for the pursuit of a full study of preindustrial female poverty. But evidence is hard to come by and can be misleading. For example, Wiberley, 94–95, cautions against reading too much from limited sources and notes a four-to-one female-male ratio in the Workhouse. Nash accepts Wiberley’s ratios without asking why the three-to-two ratio in the Almshouse was not transferred approximately to the Workhouse ratios. Were men more difficult to keep inside? Were women in the Almshouse more difficult to release into the town than were men, and more likely to be sent from the Almshouse to the Workhouse?
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 Whitwell “Account Book,” suggests that at certain times widows made up 25 percent of the Ward 10 outdoor relief recipients. The 1200 figure comes from *Boston Records*, 15:369.
- 57 *Boston Records* 1:11–13; *Shattuck*, 142–44. A very good history of smallpox in colonial Boston is Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *A Destroying Angel: The Conquest of Smallpox in Colonial Boston* (Boston, 1974). See also the scores of references in *Boston Records*, passim, for a sense of the constant presence and threat of smallpox.
- 58 Miscellaneous bound manuscripts for July 24, 1752, MHS. See also Ezekiel Price Papers, sheets 299ff., MHS, and Massachusetts Archives 59:566ff, for examples of the range of contact the Overseers had with the various public and private affairs of Boston.
- 59 *Overseers*, box 9, folder 4. “State” charges rose in relation to “town” charges for the poor after the mid-1780s, from about 40 percent to 60 percent of the total who were identified. On African-Americans see *Overseers*, box 9, folders 1–4, and box 11, folder 1, and the Almshouse Admissions charts in this introduction. See also Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998), 240–41 and Emily Blanck, “Seventeen Eighty Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery in Massachusetts,” *NEQ* 75 (2002), 24–51.
- 60 Culbert, “Sturdy Beggars”; O’Connor, “To be Poor”; *Shattuck*, 106–13; Benton, *Warning Out*, 40–62. Benton, 63, claims that as strict as were the settlement laws of Massachusetts, the Connecticut laws were even more “carefully guarded.”
- 61 Nash, “Urban Wealth.”
- 62 A good example of the language that was repeated over and over in any comment on either the decline of trade or the increase of the numbers of poor can be found in appendix 3, which is taken from *Acts and Resolves* 2:757. For the volume of repetitions of these laments see *Boston Records*, vols. 7–14, indexes, under “Trade” and “Poor.”
- 63 Douglas Lamar Jones, “The Strolling Poor: Transiency in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts,” *Journal of Social History* 5 (1975): 28–54, suggests that not only Boston but also rural Massachusetts was being overrun by numbers of wandering beggars who were being shunted from town to town. While his case is overstated, Jones is right to identify what was a growing problem for local authorities, especially after midcentury. The problem, as always, was greater in Boston than in rural Massachusetts.

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- 64 Wright, *Transformation of Charity*, and Culbert, “Sturdy Beggars.
- 65 The quotes are from *Quincy Report*, 4. See McCaughey, *Josiah Quincy*, 119–20 for an elaboration of Quincy’s view of the “vicious poor” and other hopeless categories of pauperism, and on the model of the House of Industry.
- 66 In fact, in 1794 the Overseers were once again, as in 1772, made a corporation under legal definition that included civic authority and private philanthropic organization. See *Overseers*, box 13. After 1823 they became mostly concerned with private sources of charity and by the 1840s were responsible only for private charity. See Shattuck, 106.
- 67 Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, 25, 30–42, is right to emphasize that in the eighteenth century the fixed “institution” was a “minor theme” in Boston’s “pragmatic” approach to poor relief. His point that both the Almshouse and the Workhouse were modeled on the principles of family organization, in contrast to the post-Jacksonian denaturing of the “asylum” generally, is valid. But Rothman perhaps misses the most compelling legacy of the Overseers, that the office itself became an institution that would serve as the first formalized agency of poor relief in Massachusetts. The essay by Katherine Lloyd and Cindy Burgoyne, “The Evolution of a Transatlantic Debate on Penal Reform, 1780–1830” in Hugh Cunningham and Joanna Innes, editors, *Charity, Philanthropy, and Reform from the 1690s to 1850* (New York, 1998) is a welcome note on the transatlantic nature of early nineteenth-century theories of reform.
- 68 The best place to see a Boston example of this is in the *Quincy Report* and Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*. Conrad Wright in *The Transformation of Charity* has useful things to say about the rise in private charities in the early republic.
- 69 *Quincy Report*, 5–7; see also O’Connor, “To Be Poor.” Crocker, *The Magic of the Many*, is now the fullest study of the issue, while McCaughey, *Josiah Quincy*, Chapters 6 and 7, offers a brisk and informative analysis of the great civic “revolution” of 1822. Still the best study of the nineteenth-century development of the “institution” is Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*. Rothman’s claim that the sequestering and correction of “deviants” became a tenet of public welfare in the nineteenth century is sound, but his reading of the eighteenth-century institutional treatment of the poor is not always accurate, in the case of Boston at least. For example, his remark that “the colonial community typically cared for its dependents without disrupting their lives” is not as appropriate to Boston as to rural Massachusetts. The latter, though, is closer to the “typical” social environment of the time. A very exotic treatment of almshouse history is Charles Lawrence, comp., *History of the Philadelphia Almshouse and Hospitals from the Beginning of the Eighteenth to the Ending of the Nineteenth Centuries* (Philadelphia, 1905). There is no comparable review of Boston’s almshouse. A recent and useful study of poor relief in Mexico City in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries reveals a sharp cultural difference in the ways the Massachusetts authorities viewed the treatment of poverty compared to a Catholic New World society. See the early chapters in Sylvia Marina Arrom, *Containing the Poor: The Mexico City Poorhouse, 1774–1871* (Durham, N.C., 2000).
- 70 Although Quincy is seen by a variety of historians as a conservative Federalist and as anti-republican, his autocracy was scarcely the paternalism of his eighteenth-century civic predecessors. See Baltzell, *Puritan Boston*, 200–201; McCaughey, *Josiah Quincy*, Chapter 7. McCaughey notes Quincy’s links with the earlier “Puritan–Federalist” culture and class but also acknowledges the end of “Boston’s ... deferential pattern of politics.” By 1820 the Boston Town meeting had 8,000 eligible voters. Quincy may have believed in his rights to deferential authority but he was obliged to appeal to a broad and assertive electorate. See Vernon Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought, Volume Two: Romantic Revolution in America, 1800–1860* (New York, 1954. First published in 1927), 267–287, for characteristically dismissive comments on Quincy and his class, “The Passing of the Tie–Wig School.” Parrington makes the mistake of seeing Quincy and his ilk being

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marginalized by popular democracy, when, in fact, Quincy adapted rather well to the new forces in politics and thought.

- 71 The genre of quantitative history, which appeared in earnest in early American historiography in the 1960s, has produced a huge corpus of titles. There is no single methodological text, or even a comprehensive summary available, but the collected essays in Henretta, *The Origins of American Capitalism*, and Rutman, *Small Worlds*, have useful examples of the approach as does Smith, “Poverty and Economic Marginality.” For an early and very useful example and overview see Jesse Lemisch, “The American Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up” in Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York, 1967), 3–45.
- 72 Thomas, ed., *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, passim. Ezekiel Price, a long-serving Selectman with a long record of collaboration with the Overseers and an advocate of private and public make-work schemes, has little to say in his extensive papers (MHS) about the Overseers and the Almshouse. Sewall does make passing reference to the Overseers in his diary, as does William Tudor, another early eighteenth century Overseer, but these references are not at all revealing. See Wiberley, 225.
- 73 Whitwell “Account Book.” It is unlikely that Whitwell was the only Overseer to keep such a ledger, and the absence of any other is unusual in a society that routinely preserved and passed on personal papers. None of the persons listed in Whitwell’s January 1771 accounts were on his July 1774 list and only four of the July 1774 recipients were getting relief in January 1775. It is not surprising that the number of those on relief doubled between July and January. In the summer months, Whitwell gave out cash, but in the winter most of the relief was in the form of firewood. Males dominate the lists, likely as heads of households. In July 1774 Whitwell made 29 disbursements in total and 15 of those went to three males, John Hobbs, Hugh Smith, and Jonathan Maker, who appear five times each. These are clearly “pensioned” poor relief recipients who might otherwise have been in the Almshouse.
- 74 For examples of extrapolation from sparse commentary see the imaginative job of reconstruction in Daniel Vickers, *Farmers and Fisherman: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630–1850* (Charlottesville, V.A., 1994), and Winifred Rothenberg, *From Market Places to a Market Economy: The Transformation of Rural Massachusetts, 1750–1850* (Chicago, 1992).
- 75 Cook, *Fathers of the Towns*, is the most recent (as long ago as 1976) and comprehensive study we have of town officials in eighteenth-century Massachusetts. But while Cook talks about poor relief, he does not mention the Overseers as important officeholders, and “Overseers” does not appear in his index. Perhaps the omission is reasonable in that the bulk of his study mostly concerns towns outside Boston, but his interests in the Boston civic “fathers” might have made more of the important status that the Overseers enjoyed. Conrad Wright, *Transformation of Charity*, has some comment on the Overseers, but his study is mostly outside the subject of public poor relief. Josiah Quincy Jr., in his 1852 polemic *A Municipal History of . . . Boston* discusses the Overseers with more contempt than scholarly detachment. Historians’ priorities shift over time, of course, but a recent and very useful set of essays on class in early America does not specify topics for the analysis of the public institutional manifestations of inequality. See Carla Pestana and Sharon Salinger, eds., *Inequality in Early America* (Hanover, N.H., 1999).
- 76 Culbert, “Sturdy Beggars,” deals with them only insofar as her study touches on Boston. Her focus is more legal than social. Nash, *Urban Crucible* and “Urban Wealth and Poverty,” and Kulikoff, “Progress of Inequality,” acknowledge the importance of the Overseers but cast them too easily in minor clerical roles. Smith, “Poverty and Economic Marginality,” has much to say about the administration of public poor relief but he sets the Overseers somewhat in the background because his focus is on the poor themselves and not the class relationships between the keepers and the kept.

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- 77 Clifford K. Shipton (and John L. Sibley), *Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College* (Boston, 1873–) (hereafter cited as *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*), 16:303–8.
- 78 See *Acts and Resolves*, 1:538–39, 654–55; 2:242, 756–58; and appendix 1 of this collection. The Town Meeting was subject to the legislative oversight of the General Court, and while it exercised a de facto form of municipal sovereignty at times, it could not pass laws that did not conform to the presumptive sovereignty of the General Court. Most of the laws and amendments affecting local poor relief were in fact colonial, provincial, and ultimately state acts at least down to 1822 in the case of Boston. See also T. Metcalf, ed., *The General Laws of Massachusetts from the Adoption of the Constitution to February, 1822* (Boston, 1823).
- 79 On death rates generally, see Daniel Scott Smith, “The Demographic History of Colonial New England,” *Journal of Economic History* 32 (1972): 165–83. For an example of Almshouse rates see the Admissions chart for 1758 to 1774 in this introduction.
- 80 The personal interventions of Selectmen and Overseers were crucial to the process of poor relief, and those public officials took their responsibilities seriously, of course, but according to *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 11:314, Royall Tyler padded his figures so as to appear more industrious than he was. Shipton quotes an anonymous critic: “So sure as any person in his [Tyler's] brethern's ward was to be committed to the w----k h----se, he would by some means or other, hear of it before they could ... commit them; and by this means he committed a great many more than they... and this he got trumpeted about, that he has done more than all of them.” Shipton quotes Ebenezer Parkman that “the paupers complained about him, but since they could not vote this did him no harm.” Tyler appears, then, not to have been popular with either his colleagues or the poor; nevertheless, he is the only Overseer, of the few who are mentioned in Shipton, whose hard work and long service are seen as self-serving and not altruistic.
- 81 It is difficult to know from the entries in the *Boston Records* whether there was a formal nomination procedure. But there are very few cases of a “chosen” Overseer turning down the post (“refused”). It is my belief that most of the Overseers who served first volunteered their names to the Town Meeting.
- 82 Wiberley, 163; *Overseers*, box 1, folder 1; Massachusetts Archives 132:92–147 (Boston lists). The entire province valuation for 1771 has been edited and published by Bettye Hobbs Pruitt as *The Massachusetts Tax Valuation List of 1771* (Boston, 1978). Wiberley's list of names is arranged alphabetically: Samuel Abbot, John Barrett, Melatiah Bourne, John Bradford, Benjamin Dolbeare, Joseph Gardner, John Gore, William Greenleaf, Nathaniel Greenwood, John Hill, John Leverett, Jonathan Mason, Andrew Oliver, Samuel Partridge, William Phillips, James Pitts, Edward Proctor, Joseph Sherburn, Isaac Smith, Ebenezer Storer, John White, William White, William Whitwell, Jonathan Williams.
- On the distribution of wealth and the estimating of deciles, see Henretta, “Economic Development.” To compare tax data, say, from the 1771 valuation, with any body of officials, see Seybolt, *Town Officials*, and compare with W. H. Whitmore, ed., *Massachusetts Civil List for the Colonial and Provincial Periods, 1630–1774* (Albany, N.Y., 1870). At least 15 of the pre-1776 Overseers were Harvard graduates, including Thomas Hubbard, a tireless supervisor of the Workhouse who was later Treasurer of Harvard, as well as Andrew Oliver, Samuel Sewall and William Hutchinson, a distant relative of Thomas Hutchinson. The great Boston Treasurer David Jeffries was a 1732 graduate. See *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, passim.
- 83 See John W. Tyler, *Smugglers and Patriots: Boston Merchants and the Advent of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1986), appendix. Tyler lists over four hundred merchants who were involved in various ways with the Revolution in Boston. Thirty-one of his merchants were or had been or would be Overseers, and all of them who were alive in 1776 were patriots. On the 1775 refugees and the 1777 Vose reference, see *Overseers*, box 9, folder 3. The comments on Daniel Oliver are from

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Thomas Prince, *The Faithful Servant Approv'd At Death* (Boston, 1732), 32, quoted by Wiberley, 185–86, who does not acknowledge the fact that Prince was a beneficiary of Oliver's will. Still, even if Prince's remarks are consistent with a memorial oration by a favored friend, and even if they do hint at paternalism, Oliver's many years as an Overseer in old age is a measure of a genuine commitment to the welfare of the lower classes. On the Olivers as a Boston "dynasty" see Annie Haven Thwing, *Inhabitants and Estates of the Town of Boston, 1630–1800* (CD ROM, New England Historic Genealogical Society and MHS, Boston, 2001).

- 84 Whitwell's weekly outlays amounted to about twenty shillings in busy periods to several individual recipients, see Whitwell "Account Book."
- 85 *Boston Records* 20:198–99. Phyllis Whitman Hunter, *Purchasing Identity in the Atlantic World: Massachusetts Merchants, 1670–1780* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2001), endnote on page 204, sets this ritual in a very imaginative context, by suggesting that all of Boston's merchants used civic "duty" as a measure of their class identity.
- 86 *Overseers*, box 1, folder 1; Seybolt, *Town Officials*. There has long been a false assumption about when the Overseers' office was established by law. Towner and O'Connor, "To be Poor," cite the date as 1735, over forty years after the first Overseers were appointed under the new laws of the new Massachusetts Charter.
- 87 Even in 1735 wards were not new to Boston. Militia wards had existed from 1713.
- 88 Seybolt, *Town Officials*, 111. Phyllis Hunter, *Purchasing Identity in the Atlantic World*, Chapter 4, 129–30, has some very sensible things to say about the self-conscious gentility, style, and civic duty exhibited by senior town officials. As noted, these were mostly merchants, and Hunter supposes that by serving the community in public office, and by demonstrating care for the needy, Boston's merchant class filled out their roles as respectable citizens of the Empire. There would be a redefinition of civic responsibility in the Republic, as the truncated role of the Overseers after 1823 shows.
- 89 David Jeffries resigned as Town Treasurer in March 1782 when the Boston treasury finally went empty. Soldiers patrolled the streets, and public security and public welfare was left largely to voluntary acts and contributions. *Sibley's Harvard Graduates* 9:177–79 also notes sympathetically that Jeffries was owed "some hundreds of pounds" by the town when he left his office, "overcome by the problem" of civic insolvency. Jeffries's own extensive papers are at the Massachusetts Historical Society. Shipton makes the wry observation that the "treasurership of Deacon Jeffries still haunts the City of Boston, for his notes, repudiated in the settlement after his resignation, are occasionally presented for payment."
- 90 Seybolt, *Town Officials*; *Overseers*, box 9, folders 3–4.
- 91 Royall Tyler's "self aggrandizement" (*Sibley's Harvard Graduates*) is a conspicuous exception but an exception nonetheless. By "conservative" is meant an insistence on separate facilities for different classes of need or "deviance."
- 92 See Thwing, *Inhabitants and Estates*, Seybolt, *Town Officials* and Whitmore, *Massachusetts Civil List*.
- 93 Rothenberg, *From Market Places*, 1–55, contains the best new analysis of that phenomenon and offers a rich historiographical summary of the issue.

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- 94 The stated general economic and demographic crises that appear in the *Boston Records*, vols. 12–20, and later in the sheer volume of transients seeking relief (*Overseers*, box 9, folder 3) attest to the need for more oversight. Wiberley, 76–78, makes the interesting observation that a new “breed” of Overseers began serving in the 1760s. He implies that they were tougher on paupers and more discriminating in fiscal terms. Perhaps, but they also appear to have been more committed to the welfare of the needy as their numbers increased and their conditions deteriorated. On Philadelphia see Wiberley, chapter 6 and Smith, “Poverty and Economic Marginality.” Smith notes committees with titles such as “the Guardians of the Poor.” Gary Nash, *First City and the Forging of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia, 2002), 70, mentions a “Committee to Alleviate the Miseries of the Poor.” Nash also notes that the Philadelphia almshouse built in the 1760s was the largest building in America at the time. It was aptly named the “Bettering House” and unlike Boston’s Almshouse was intended to combine the functions of alms and corrective work for the idle poor. On the differences in the public administrative culture of eighteenth-century American ports the older secondary literature is still useful. See, for example, Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness* (1938) and *Cities in Revolt* (1955); Sam Bass Warner Jr., *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth* (Philadelphia, 1968); G. B. Warden, *Boston, 1687–1776*; Nash, *The Urban Crucible*; Wiberley finds structural differences in his four sample cities, but similar class identities among the overseers. See also Robert E. Cray Jr., *Paupers and Poor Relief in New York City and its Rural Environs* (Philadelphia, 1988); Simon P. Newman, *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2003).
- 95 For Proctor, see *Overseers*, box 9, folder 3. Samuel Whitwell spent sixty–nine pounds on fifty–nine persons in 1769. The cost of providing indoor relief to the stream of inmates that Proctor sent in would have been three to four times that. See Wiberley, 76, 142, 178, for estimates of costs. In some years the Almshouse accommodated more out-of-town admissions than local ones. See *Overseers*, box 9, folder 4.
- 96 Quincy, *A Municipal History*, 34–38, 47–53; *Quincy Report*, passim.
- 97 Scattered financial data can be found in the *Boston Records*. See also Wiberley’s estimates.
- 98 *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, 9:177. Whitwell, “Account Book.” The Overseers resorted to threat during the acute crisis of 1780–83. In 1781 they informed the Town Meeting that “unless they are furnished with some [money] they must open the Almshouse Doors to let the Poor out.” *Boston Records*, 26:189, 205. See also *Boston Records* 26:242, which quotes the Overseers as reporting that “the Poor in the Almshouse . . . have been without Bread ever since Last Tuesday, untill Saturday when only two hundred [weight] of hard Bread was procured for them . . . and nothing but Water for them to drink.”
- 99 *Boston Records*, 15:245–46.
- 100 *Overseers*, box 1, folder 2. A summary of the total poor relief expenditures claimed by the Overseers for the 30 years up to 1768 is offered here with some confidence in light of the complete financial statements in *Overseers*, box 1, folder 2. A caution is advised on the percentage assigned to outdoor relief. I have used Stephen Wiberley’s estimates, but like my own, which are about the same, they are subject to some guesswork. See Wiberley, 76.

Year	Total expenditure (% outdoor) (in Pounds)	Year	Total expenditure (% outdoor) (in Pounds)
1738	3,165 (49% outdoor)		
1739	3,021 (44%)	1754	1,287 (35%)
1740	3,155 (50%)	1755	1,376 (44%)
1741	3,981 (48%)	1756	1,454 (48%)



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1742 7,801 (28%)	1757 1,555 (33%)
1743 4,640 (42%)	1758 1,123 (39%)
1744 4,248 (48%)	1759 1,403 (26%)
1745 5,553 (40%)	1760 1,602 (26%)
1746 5,058 (43%)	1761 1,607 (29%)
1747 10,028 (43%)	1762 1,556 (29%)
1748 10,866 (45%)	1763 1,723 (23%)
1749 9,496 (45%)	1764 1,837 (27%)
1750 1,455 (43%)	1765 2,102 (29%)
1751 1,276 (52%)	1766 2,521 (31%)
1752 1,517 (35%)	1767 3,127 (30%)
1753 1,165 (30%)	1768 2,597 (31%)

The huge increase in expenditures in 1742 is an aberration. In 1741 the Town Meeting agreed to expand the size of the Almshouse. It was completed in 1742 and the costs of the expansion were charged to the town treasury along with the normal poor relief budget. As much as three thousand pounds of the 1742 expenditure is therefore construction cost. The percentage of outdoor relief expenses did not drop, as they appear to in the chart, because those expenses were factored into the gross amount for the year. My estimate of the outdoor expense percentage is 45 to 48 percent for 1742. See *Overseers*, box 1, folder 2, for June 2, 1742. See also *Boston Records* 12:281; 15:292. As for the numerical fluctuations, and in particular the 1746 to 1747 and 1749 to 1750 amounts, it should be noted that between 1730 and 1750 the value of Massachusetts currency, “Old Tenor,” was eroded steadily to about one-third its sterling value. Not only do the figures look high, there is little consistency in their relation to other economic values. The return to a silver-based currency by the General Court in 1750 (*Acts and Resolves*, 3:430–41) led to “twenty-five years of . . . stability in the course of exchange [against sterling] in Massachusetts. Par was set . . . at 133.33 [‘lawful money’ to sterling].” The conversion rate of lawful money to Old Tenor was initially set at 1:7.5. See John J. McCusker, *Money and Exchange in Europe and America: A Handbook* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1978), 133, 141.

Only a few random separate figures survive for Workhouse expenses. They are clearly only partial expenditures and are for direct out-of-pocket expenses by Overseers specifically for the Workhouse. Figures are given for every year up to 1753 and for only four times after that. The largest number of separate accounts, including payments to tradesmen, suppliers, the Overseers themselves, and the keeper, is twenty-six, compared to over one hundred annually for the Almshouse. In most years only a handful of claims appear. The most consistent charge is for the keeper, usually Joseph Lasenby, who served for more than twenty years after 1751.

<u>Old Tenor</u>	<u>Lawful Money</u>
1740 926–1–0	1750 53–6–8
1741 643–15–9	1751 206–1–8
1742 1,439–19–9	1752 238–16–5
1743 968–3–9	1753 141–4–11
1744 406–7–9	1755 99–1–8
1745 1,094–11–4	1757 50–10–4 3/4
1746 209–14–5	1758 70–10–11
1747 300–0–0	1760 100–0–0
1748 700–0–0	
1749 1,304–8–4	

Given the exchange values between Old Tenor and lawful money, the aggregate sums for the 1740s and 1750s are very close. It is not likely that these figures were duplicated by the Overseers in their general annual charges to the Town Treasurer. These accounts were found with the manuscript version of the “Rules of the Workhouse” (*Overseers*, box 13, folder 1) that are transcribed in appendix 4.

## Notes



- 101 Whitwell "Account Book" indicates that he had only 19 full time "pensioners" (that is, recipients of a monthly support stipend) between 1768 and 1775. Wiberley, 141–42, estimates that only 39 claimants received full and continuous (month-to-month) pensions outside the Almshouse between 1750 and 1775.
- 102 *Boston Records*, 15:369.
- 103 Whitwell "Account Book."
- 104 *Ibid.*
- 105 See appendix 1. Towner, 424, notes that those paying taxes did not have to give up their children, even if the Overseers wanted to bind them out.
- 106 Boston Indentures, 6 vols., Boston Public Library, 1:n. p.
- 107 Boston Indentures; Towner, "Table of Indentures."
- 108 Boston Indentures, 6:97.
- 109 As noted the original manuscript contracts (indentures) are in the Rare Books and Manuscripts division of the Boston Public Library. When Towner used them they were in the possession of the Boston City Clerk. The lists that have survived in the Overseers collection are in *Overseers*, box 9, folder 1.
- 110 Towner, "Table of Indentures."
- 111 This assumption is based largely on the 1756 Almshouse census where children without parents are shown to be lodged with other adults.
- 112 *Overseers Guide*, 26–29; *General Laws of Massachusetts From the Adoption of the Constitution to February 1822* (Boston, 1875); Benton, *Warning Out*, chapters 2, 3, 7; Culbert, "Sturdy Beggars," chapter 3.
- 113 *Ibid.*; Benton, *Warning Out*, 52.
- 114 *Boston Records* 20:130, 139. The Sweetser mentioned here, or more likely his son, became an Overseer of the Poor in 1776. See also Robert Love, "Received by Order of the selectmen," MHS.
- 115 Love, "Received by Order."
- 116 *Overseers*, box 1, folder 2. Those warned were given precise instructions on how they were to leave. A note in the Boston Town Papers manuscripts in the Boston Public Library, 7:73, shows that 205 persons were warned to depart "by land" and 67 "by water" between January 29 and September 1, 1765.
- 117 *Overseers*, box 1, folders 3–4. There are references throughout the *Boston Records* and the Boston Town Papers to the care that the Overseers provided to sick transients. The extensive minutes held by the Boston Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection identify many cases of this kind of care. See Boston Overseers of the Poor Vote Book, 1788–1809 (catalog number Ms q. Bos. W1, and a second volume for 1809–1820, catalog number Ms. q. Am 2322). There is no record of

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how these Overseers documents, and many others at the Boston Public Library, were separated from the main collection now at the MHS.

- 118 See Nash, “Urban Wealth and Poverty,” and Jones, “The Strolling Poor.” See also *Boston Records*, 20: passim.
- 119 See Ruth Wallis Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans: Living on the Margin in Early New England* (Philadelphia, 2001). This is a welcome study of warning out and of New England transiency in general, and is much more analytical than Benton’s older study. But its emphasis on case studies and its use of New England in the title, when it is concerned exclusively with eighteenth-century Rhode Island, limits its application to the Boston Overseers Warning Out Lists.
- 120 *Overseers*, box 1, folders 3, 4; box 9, folder 4. My counts differ slightly from those in Wiberley, 47, and Alan Kulikoff, “The Progress of Inequality,” 400, but the differences do not affect the similar frequencies of warnings that we find. (The surnames beginning with A and part of B are missing from the 1771–3 lists). The counts here are approximate and were done by hand from the manuscripts.

Table 1. 1745–1770

<u>Total Warnings</u> (includes groups and individuals)	3,409
Origins	
New England	2,313 (68 percent)
Group (including families) warnings (approximately 3,200 persons)	700
Individual warnings	2,598
<u>Total number of persons warned out</u>	5,798
(including)	
“Blacks,” “Negroes,” “Molattoes”	74
“Indian”	56
“Widow”	26
“Poor”	13
(including “very poor,” “and wicked,” “a stroller”)	
“Crazy,” “Distracted”	7
(including “a noted thief”)	
“Sick”, “Lame”	2
“Soldiers” with families	8
“Soldiers’ Wives”	9
“With Servants”	6
(including one family with four servants)	

Table 2. 1771–73 (part of the record is missing)

<u>Total warnings</u>	429
Origins	
New England	273 (64 percent)
Other American (13 colonies)	74
Other	82

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(including North America)	
“Negroes”	10
“Molattoes”	3
“Indians”	5
<u>Total persons warned out</u>	800
(Males: 309)	
(Females: 272)	
(Children: 229)	
(identified as such)	

Table 3. 1791–92 (two full years)

<u>Total warnings</u>	2,113
Origins	
Massachusetts	1,482
Other New England	51
Other United States	79
Foreign	501
<u>Total number of persons warned out</u>	2,528
(Males: 1,242)	
(Females: 1,091)	
(Children: 195)	
(identified as such)	

- 121 *Ibid.*, and under the 1739 act, a person not warned out within three months of arrival could legally claim residence in the town.
- 122 It appears that before the bonus system was introduced the job of warning out was ill defined; the responsibility was with the Selectmen. (*Boston Records* 15:50.)
- 123 *Overseers*, box 9, folder 4.
- 124 As for indoor relief, there is no question that at least 5,000 persons were admitted into the Almshouse in this period, some of them several times; see *Overseers*, boxes 1 and 9, passim. The estimates for outdoor relief are based on projections made on the basis of Overseers' claims on the town treasury (*Overseers*, box 1, folder 2), and estimates of numbers of outdoor relief constituents for all Overseers drawn from Whitwell "Account Book." Whitwell alone, as one of twelve Overseers, assisted about 250 different people in the 1770s.
- 125 The figures for the numbers of people getting outdoor relief are quite speculative. They are extrapolated from the hundreds of names entered in the only surviving list of outdoor poor, Samuel Whitwell's, matched with his submitted costs, and then applied in a rough per capita estimate to the known costs of outdoor relief for all twelve Overseers in certain years. Nash, "Urban Wealth and Poverty," 463, makes a somewhat higher estimate of recipients than I do. Wiberley, 166ff., suggests the same kind of frequency for outdoor relief as does Nash.
- 126 On Fowles, see *Overseers*, box 9, folder 4. After 1795 the Almshouse entries contain more personalized information on inmates, and regular censuses begin to appear in the records by 1810. The insane and sick are specifically identified in the later documents. See "Guide."

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- 127 Alms comes from the Greek *eleos* (“pity”). The term eleemosynary (“charitable”) is from the same root. In fact, the appearance of the word alms in the English Middle Ages gives the word a deep root in the history of Anglo-American poor relief. But it was a much wider concept, as Robert Jutte, *Poverty and Deviance*, has noted in his references to European poor relief. A very sound review of the English tradition, and a very useful chronology is in Slack, *English Poor Law*.
- 128 See *Overseers*, box 9, folder 6. As noted, the early nineteenth-century Almshouse lists are more detailed than the earlier records and include much more data on inmates’ ages, residence status, medical condition and so on.
- 129 *Quincy Report*.
- 130 *Overseers*, box 1, folder 4; box 9, folders 1–4. As noted, as their numbers rose in the Almshouse, the number of African Americans in the Boston population fell, as did the ratio to whites. See Shattuck, 5, and Felt, “Statistics,” 208–14. Carr, “A Change,” 598–601, does not discuss the upsurge in Almshouse admissions for African Americans in her study of demographic change. See the interesting comment in J. Melish, *Disowning Slavery*: 240–41.
- 131 The entry for a province or state charge was accompanied by the names of two Selectmen and one Overseer. For town charges, only the Overseer’s name was entered, because only the Overseer’s authority was required for Bostonians’ admissions.
- 132 Culbert, 90–92.
- 133 For the original Almshouse see *Boston Records* 1:78 and 7:174 and passim. For the 1742 addition, see *Boston Records* 12:281, 15:292. While there is no final declaration in the record that this proposed addition was completed there is enough circumstantial evidence in the *Boston Records* and in the Overseers financial records to indicate that a leg of the ‘L’ was added then. The history of Boston’s late eighteenth-century alternative “workhouses” is dealt with in detail by Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 190–96; Nellis, “Misreading the Signs”; and Wiberley, 97–109.
- 134 Wiberley, 33, finds 249 deaths. I cannot find the reason for the discrepancy in our counts.
- 135 The 1742 census figures may in fact be conservative. See the census and comments in *Boston Records*, 15:369–70 and in Shattuck, 3. On most of the population estimates see Shattuck, 5, 26, 46. There may be no more variable sets of numbers for Boston than those that are used for its pre-1790 population. See the figures in Nash, “Urban Wealth and Poverty,” for example. Shattuck, who combed all the old censuses, is reliable, but he sometimes omits the “colored” from his tabulations. Alfred Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston, 1999), Part II, chapter 4, has some very useful points to make about the substantive changes in Boston’s population during and after the revolution. See also Carr, “A Change.”
- 136 Culbert, “Sturdy Beggars,” 82–117, 160ff. The *Quincy Report* of 1821 both reflects reforms underway and calls for more radical reforms.
- 137 Perhaps it is better to think of Almshouse “punishments” in terms of restricted privileges for bad behavior. Inmates could be sent to the Workhouse for breaches of the conduct rules. There is no allowance that I can find for corporal punishment. Discipline was maintained, in part, by the threat of expulsion to the Workhouse. See *Overseers*, box 9, passim.
- 138 Walter Muir Whitehill, *A Topographical History of Boston*, 2d ed. [Boston, 1968], 64; *Boston Records* 31:399–400; Harold and James Kirker, *Bulfinch’s Boston, 1787–1817* (New York, 1964), 97. The site was in the West End in 1800, but that area is now considered to be part of the North End. In

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1800 the old North End was in general decline as new buildings in “Bulfinch’s Boston” eclipsed the quality of the town’s older architecture, and when the commercial, governmental and prime residential areas were redefined. See *Bulfinch’s Boston*, 11–13, and the maps on the inside of the front and back covers, and Young, *The Shoemaker*, II:126–27, for examples. Bulfinch had been a long-serving Selectman in Boston and according to Kirker and Kirker his involvement in the 1799–1801 Almshouse resulted from an abiding interest in the poor. This seems to be a bit of a stretch, because Bulfinch took any civic architectural job that he could. The Kirkers also conflate the roles of the Selectmen and the Overseers.

- 139 The Almshouse manuscript census of 1756 appeared in the most unexpected of places, in volume 1 of the Indentures collection in the Boston Public Library (the collection was formerly at Boston City Hall), stuck to the back of page 1. The only other reference I have seen to the document is in Nash, “Urban Wealth and Poverty,” 559. Nash counted 148 people in the house, while I can find as few as 121 and as many as 141, depending on how I decipher the clerk’s notations. The clerk states that 133 was the total.
- 140 “Samuel Proctor Account,” MHS Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, September 1, 1765.
- 141 *Ibid.*
- 142 Towner, 428–29.
- 143 The 1789 quote is from Boston Overseers of the Poor Vote Book, 1788–1809, Boston Public Library. For the 1740s see *Overseers*, box 1, folder 2. See also J. B. Blake, *Public Health in the Town of Boston, 1630–1822* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959).
- 144 For frequencies see *Overseers*, box 9, folders 1–4. The examples here are from the 1760s.
- 145 Quoted in Kirker and Kirker, *Bulfinch’s Boston*, 97.
- 146 Wiberley, 149.
- 147 “Bill of Fare, Boston Almshouse, 1819,” MHS (not part of the Overseers Records).
- 148 *Boston Records*, Volume 26, contains some references to wartime victualing.
- 149 For frequencies see *Overseers*, box 1, folders 1–4.
- 150 *Boston Records*, 35:351–54. On the 1760s, see *Overseers*, box 9, folders 1, 2, 3.
- 151 The quote is from T. Pemberton, “A Topographical and Historical Description of Boston, 1794,” in MHS *Collections* 3:251–52.
- 152 *Boston Records*, 31:239.
- 153 *Boston Records*, 1:78; 12:159–60.
- 154 By the 1790s the absence of sleeping space in the Workhouse was clearly adding to the space problems in the Almshouse.
- 155 *Boston Records*, 12:273.

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- 156 *Boston Records*, 15:4, 6, 33, will serve as examples. Once again it is regretted that there are no surviving records of Overseers' meetings minutes until the 1790s, and those are not part of the Overseers collection at MHS. For the 1790s there are numerous sets of minutes of Overseers meetings at the Boston Public Library (Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, see catalog number Ms.q. Bos w1). These manuscripts contain a regular accounting of budgets for burials, medical care, repairs to the buildings, salaries of keepers, clerks, watchmen and the various indoor and outdoor expenses of poor relief. But for the rest of the period under review, and in regard to the transcribed documents in this volume, details have to be gleaned from the published Selectmen's and Town Meeting minutes in the *Boston Records*.
- 157 The original list of subscribers is in *Boston Records*, 12:180–83.
- 158 *Boston Records*, 14:150.
- 159 The linen manufacturing scheme of the 1750s and 1760s is the most ambitious attempt to implement the model. As with all similar schemes in colonial America, it failed. See Nellis, "Misreading the Signs."
- 160 *Overseers*, box 9, folders 1 and 4.
- 161 *Boston Records*, 12:273 for 1741; *Overseers*, box 13, folder 2, for the 1790s.
- 162 *Overseers*, box 13, folder 2.
- 163 *Ibid.*
- 164 *Ibid.* The deaths appear to have been among the elderly, for the most part. What is not known is the number who went into the Almshouse deliberately to spend their last days there.
- 165 *Overseers*, Box 13, folder 2.
- 166 *Boston Records* 35:351–4.
- 167 Rothman, *Discovery*, passim; *Quincy Report*; and the dense polemic *The Overseers of the Poor ... to their Constituents* (Boston, 1832), 32 pages. Copy at MHS. The quotes are from *Boston Records*, 35:351–54.
- 168 *Overseers*, box 9, folder 1.
- 169 *Ibid.*
- 170 Carr, "A Change," and Young, *The Shoemaker*, Part I, for the depopulation and repopulation of Boston.
- 171 *Overseers*, box 9, folder 3. The thirty-two who were evacuated were reported to have "gone over on the ferry," but which ferry is not clear.
- 172 *Overseers*, box 9, folder 1.
- 173 Shattuck, 142–44; Winslow, *A Destroying Angel*.
- 174 *Boston Records*, passim (indexed) can be consulted for many examples of this.

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- 175 Winslow, *A Destroying Angel* and *Overseers*, box 9, folder 3.
- 176 *Boston Records* 20:246, 261.
- 177 *Overseers*, box, 9, folder 4; Towner.
- 178 *Overseers*, box, 9, folder 4.
- 179 Chauncy, *The Idle Poor*, and Cooper, *A Sermon Preached in Boston*.
- 180 Shattuck, *passim*, refers to a blind asylum, house of industry, house of correction, state jail, house of reformation (for wayward children), and a lunatic hospital. There appears to be no mention of a separate facility for unmarried mothers or pregnant girls.
- 181 *Overseers*, box 9, folder 2.
- 182 *Ibid*; Thwing, *Inhabitants and Estates*, is a useful starting point for a review of family associations.
- 183 *Overseers*, box 11, folder 2.
- 184 In a clear demonstration of that change, Lemuel Shattuck's magisterial *Report* of 1846, as humane as it and its author were, is a celebration of a statistical determinism. It offers no homage, not even a sentimental one, to eighteenth-century public welfare ideas or practices.