

GROUP 1: DUXBURY

Excerpts from the Town Returns to the Quincy Committee, 1821

In 1820, the Massachusetts General Court (State Legislature) appointed a special committee, headed by Josiah Quincy, a well-known politician and reformer to investigate the methods used for the relief of paupers in Massachusetts towns, to study the problems of the poor relief system, and to recommend revisions of the laws on poor relief. The Quincy Committee sent out a survey or questionnaire to all the towns in the state, asking them to describe their poor relief systems and describe the problems they encountered. 162 towns responded. The Committee's final report was published in 1821. Appended to the report were excerpts from 32 of the 162 town responses, referred to as returns. As a group the published returns strongly favored the establishment of poor farms and poorhouses. A sampling of the returns has been included here.

DUXBURY.

The expense of maintaining the poor, since the establishment of an Alms House, is more than fifty per cent. less than the year preceding; but by adding the interest on the money which the poor house cost, it will make the saving something less than fifty per cent. The saving arises from two causes, first, by reducing the number of the poor, and second, from the same number's being boarded cheaper in an Alms House, than in private families. The number of the poor maintained by the town is reduced, by reasons of an unwillingness in the poor to go to the Alms House, and in their friends to let them go, and greater exertions are made by both, for their support otherwise.

There are about four acres of poor land attached to the Alms House. The poor are principally employed in picking oakum; but there is but very little demand for that article at this time, and consequently we realize but very little from the labor of the poor.

We employ a man and his wife, as keepers of the house, and pay them two hundred dollars a year; we are so fortunate as to have very good keepers. It is our opinion that the utility of an Alms House depends very much on the convenience of the house, and the ability and integrity of the keepers.

By the short experience we have had in supporting poor in the Alms House, we are confident that it is the cheapest way, where the number is twenty or more.

The poor in our town are much more comfortable in the Alms House, than they were when boarded out.

Source

Josiah Quincy, *Massachusetts, General Court, Committee on Pauper Laws* [Boston, Printed by Russell and Gardner, 1821], 13-16, 18-20, 22-23, 26-27, 31-32, 34-35. Edited by Old Sturbridge Village.

GROUP 2: DANVERS

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DANVERS.

Agreeable to your request we inform you that we have a Charity House, attached to which is about 200 acres of land.

The employment of those that are able to work, is principally agricultural. The domestic arrangement is committed to the mistress: and the female poor are employed in spinning, weaving, and such other work as is generally performed in large families. The poor who are able to work, do it with cheerfulness, and but little coercion has been found necessary for the performance of what they are able to do. In respect to the comparative benefit of supporting the poor in Poor Houses, or at large, we answer, that, in our opinion, a Poor House has many advantages over promiscuous*, or boarding at large. 1st. The poor are under the immediate charge of a master or mistress, selected by the Board with special respect to their good principles and habits, and capacity for government and economy, and whom the poor are taught to respect and obey by the directions of the Overseers. 2d. The constant or stated visits of the Boards. 3d. The Board can at any time inspect the whole of the Poor at one visit; make certain inquiry and obtain information of the conduct and general deportment, of all under their control; give advice, admonish, restrict, punish, or award, as the general interest requires. 4th. A house of this description is a check to disorderly persons, and saves expense from the common course of law. Besides, being united in one house, their habits can be marked, and the employment best suited to their age and capacity more distinctly pointed out. We enjoin the keepers of the house to give advice and when the subjects prove refractory, to make use to suitable means to reclaim them. Boarding at large. 1st. The person who receives the Pauper, generally does it from a principle of gain, or some advantage separate from the comfort and reformation of the individual. Generally, therefore, there is not that attention given, necessary; and often the Pauper experiences careless indifference, resulting from his being poor and dependent, and that too by his own misconduct: Consequently, reformation, (if any is necessary), health, cleanliness, acquiring industrious habits, & c. are sacrificed to self interest. No doubt remains with us, by a comparative view, that the advantage is manifestly in favor of a Poor House. By the consideration of less expense, order, regularity, industry and temperance, hope of amendment to the vicious, and assistance to the reformed. For morality is considered essential to peaceable society, and reformation in the poor of a town, is a great pecuniary benefit.

Glossary

*promiscuous - composed of all sorts of things or persons, of high or low position, male and female

Source

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GROUP 3: BEVERLY

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BEVERLY.

It may be confidently stated that the chief sources of pauperism in this country, are idle-ness, improvidence and intemperance. If any laws can be devised to lessen the operation of those causes, pauperism will be lessened nearly in the same proportion.

The manner in which both public and private charity is often administered, affords encouragement to each of those vices. The idle will beg in preference to working; relief is extended to them without suitable discrimination. They are not left to feel that just consequences of their idleness. The industrious poor are discouraged by observing that bounty bestowed upon the idle, which they can only obtain by the sweat of their brow . . .

Intemperance is the most fruitful source of pauperism: More than half the adult persons who have been admitted to our Work House, for sixteen years, have been addicted to the excessive use of ardent spirits. As an amendment to the existing laws upon this subject, it is suggested that drunkenness should be made punishable either by fine and imprisonment, by a summary process before a Justice of the Peace, or by commitment to the Work House by the Overseers of the Poor; that the use of ardent spirits in Work Houses, or by Paupers, who are supported or relieved by their towns, should be prohibited; that retailers of spirituous liquors be prohibited, under a penalty to be recovered in a summary way, from selling any spirituous liquors to any person who is supported or relieved by any town as a Pauper; that Overseers of the Poor be prohibited from affording any relief to any person as a Pauper, who is habitually intemperate in the use of ardent spirits, unless such person shall be con-fined in some Work House or House of Correction; that the number of retailers of spirituous liquors, should be restricted in a certain proportion to the number of inhabitants in each town, and that the duty on licenses to retailers, be increased.

Source

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GROUP 4: PEPPERELL

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PEPPERELL.

It will be proper here to suggest . . . that previous to the year 1818, this corporation had invariably been in the habit of letting out the poor to those persons who would take them on the cheapest terms, at public auction, without due regard to proper situations and suitable accommodations. Thus it frequently happened, that the truly unfortunate and worthy Pauper, would suffer materially for the necessaries of life, and not unfrequently meet with unkind treatment from the person who contracted to support him. Notwithstanding attempts had been made at various times to substitute some more feasible and economical method of supporting the Poor, the inhabitants could not be convinced of its expediency until this year, (1818,) when it was discovered that the expenses of maintenance had almost doubled.

This arrested the undivided attention of the citizens. At a regular Town Meeting it was voted, to instruct the Overseers of the Poor, who were joined by a respectable Committee, to contract with some person or persons to support them in a family; the contractor or contractors to furnish and supply all the poor of said town constantly, and at all times, with suitable meals, drink, clothing, lodging and nursing, good medical aid, in case of sickness, and schooling proper to the young; and in case of the decease of any of the poor, to see them decently interred free of any expense to the town. Notwithstanding this town has never erected a house to be exclusively appropriated to the use of the poor, the method we have lately adopted, will enable us to draw a comparison between the one mode and the other. In all towns there is a class of people naturally disposed to be lazy and indolent, and while they can be billeted out in private families, they continue to indulge themselves in such habits. They care but little for any thing more than what is sufficient to nourish the body, and while the whole corporation is at the expense of their maintenance in this way, they pass their time in sloth and inactivity. Place these characters in a family where the whole body of the poor are situated, and you find they are uneasy and discontented. A degree of pride begins to operate in their bosoms; this proves an incentive to exertion; they quit their station and shift for themselves. Here, then, eventually, is a saving to their town. Consider the subject in a more important point of view: Many characters become a burden to society by their dissolute and intemperate habits. This is an increasing evil in all towns. Persons of this description placed under the immediate inspection and control of a Superintendent, whose interest it will be to look after their morals and command their labor, will possibly in time become renovated. It is the duty of those who manage the prudentials* of a corporation to study economy and retrench all unnecessary expenses, and when such exertions are seconded by an union of its members, the effects resulting therefrom are speedily realized . . .

Thus we infer, that as it relates to this town, and we see nothing why it will not apply to other towns,

the method of supporting the poor in Poor Houses, is most advantageous, attended with the least expense and most conducive to habits of temperance, industry, and economy.

Glossary

*prudentials - discretionary concerns and economy

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