

Title Historical Background on the Poor and Poor Relief in Early 19th-Century New England
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Background material for teachers summarizing the major concepts presented in primary source documents related to poor relief in early 19th-century Massachusetts.

By 21st century American standards, most early New Englanders were poor. As a result of technological innovation and economic growth, American society as a whole has grown much wealthier than it was two centuries ago. What were once luxuries are now seen as necessities. The sizes of our cars, homes, and even our meals have grown ever larger. Most of us have more possessions than our parents and grandparents did. Yet the same was true for early 19th-century Americans as well. The expansion of the market economy and the beginnings of industrialization were already transforming the standard of living. For example, the living standards of the poor in the 1830s were equivalent to those of most people a hundred years earlier. At the same time, there was greater economic inequality. Most people were better off, but there was a growing disparity of wealth between the rich and the poor. Attitudes were being transformed as well. How Americans perceived poverty and thought the poor should be cared for were also changing by the early 1800s.

For centuries most New Englanders viewed poverty as an unfortunate but inevitable part of a pre-ordained social order. Families were expected, and in many cases required by law, to care for relations in need. Sometimes private benevolent groups temporarily aided those on the edge of poverty or who had suffered from a sudden calamity. Ladies' charitable societies, for example, existed in many towns and might loan clothing or household linens, or provide other assistance to a family in need. Yet many poor had no kin to turn to, and private charities had limited means and their assistance was very selective. The last resort for those in need was town poor relief. A small percentage (1-2%) of people who were chronically poor, required care because of advanced age or a physical or mental disability, or through sudden calamity such as fire or death of a spouse, had no alternative but to "go upon the town" and turn to their local government for assistance in order to survive. A complicated system of 'settlements' determined which town had ultimate financial responsibility for which individuals. A settlement was essentially the individual's right to claim support from a particular town. This protected towns from having to aid any and all claimants. The laws governing settlements became extremely complex, but basically they provided that:

- a man derived his settlement from the town where he had owned land or paid taxes
- a woman derived her settlement from her husband or her father
- children followed the settlement of their father. If the father did not have a settlement, children would follow the mother.

In situations where there was no settlement at all—perhaps someone had been born in a different state or even a different country—the state was responsible. Usually in these cases the state would pay the town where the person was residing for their maintenance. Since the sum the state paid was capped,

the towns often paid out more than the reimbursement.

In 1820, a committee, appointed by the Massachusetts General Court (State Legislature), investigated the methods used for the relief of paupers in Massachusetts towns, studied the problems of the poor relief system, and recommended revisions of the laws on poor relief. In 1821, Josiah Quincy, chairman of the committee, published a report in which he identified four options available to towns to care for the poor:

1. *“Provision for the poor, by letting them out to the lowest bidder, in families at large, within the town.”*

With this option, the town paid for care of the indigent in private homes. The process was referred to as the ‘**vendue**,’ a public sale or auction when the town accepted bids for the care of the pauper.

Occasionally this process gave the mistaken impression that the poor person was being sold. This typically led to the break-up of poor families. Adults, too, were placed in unrelated families, and often required to move from year to year.

2. *“Provision, by letting them to the lowest bidder, together; that is, all to one person.”* With this option, the town contracted with one individual to provide for all of the town’s poor.

3. *“Provision, by supplies, in money, or articles, at their own houses.”* The town’s Overseers of the Poor (who frequently were also the town’s Selectmen, or board of administrators) might use public funds to give “outdoor” or “partial” relief in the form of a small grant of money or supplies, such as a barrel of flour, to a pauper or a poor family otherwise able to get by. However, most who “went upon the town” required more care than this.

4. *“Provision, by poor, or alms, houses.”* Using this option, the town supported the poor in a town-owned dwelling, under the management of a superintendent. This was often referred to as ‘indoor relief.’ Various terms were used to describe the property. Some of them were poor house, poor farm, almshouse, or workhouse.

It should be noted that poor children or those without family to provide for them were usually “bound out” in a family once they were old enough to perform some work or help out in a household. This involved an indenture, the legal term for a written contract, requiring the family to provide housing, clothing, necessities, schooling and training so that the child would eventually become a productive member of the community. This provided consistent care and supervision for girls until they were 18 and boys until they were 21.

By the first decade of the 19th century, opinions began to change about the causes of poverty and the best ways to care for society’s poor. The Quincy Report reflected this increasingly prevalent attitude among 19th-century Americans. One of their conclusions distinguished between the “impotent poor” or “worthy poor” who were incapable of work (the elderly and the severely disabled), and the “able poor” who could labor to help support themselves. Even though most people on town relief fell into the “impotent poor” category, they focused most of their attention on the problem of the “able poor.” With a declining belief in divine predestination, and a growing commitment both to individualism and unlimited social and economic progress, the “able poor” were seen as personally to blame for their own condition. Laziness and intemperance led the list of likely causes. Care of the poor was swept up in a rising tide of general social reform, and change was in the air.

Outdoor relief was often criticized as the most expensive and the least likely to lead to reform. Some thought it might encourage dissipation and discourage initiative. Also, there was no on-going supervision if the poor remained in a private home.

The *vendue* system, either of poor persons to households or to a single contractor, which many small towns relied upon, was increasingly criticized as insensitive to the poor and lacking adequate supervision of the poor and their providers.

The *poor houses or poor farms* that were also referred to as *town farms* were supported by many, since they could provide consistent care to the impotent poor. Poor farms were thought to be more economical since any work done by the able poor could be applied against the expenses. The presence of a resident Superintendent could provide adequate oversight, especially in the abuse of alcohol.

By the 1840s, most New England communities had changed their methods of caring for the poor. Partial, “outdoor” relief was still granted to some, but this was increasingly seen as expensive, inefficient, and encouraging laziness and bad habits. Most towns also abandoned the old vendue system of privatized care in favor of a more centralized, institutional solution. Most New Englanders had come to believe that the vendue system was degrading and morally debilitating for the paupers, and often kept them in unhealthy environments where they were poorly cared for or even exploited. Instead, towns increasingly placed their poor into single, town-owned “poor farms” in rural areas, and “workhouses” in urban communities. Proponents of this system argued that work houses and poor farms, despite a sizable initial investment, would ultimately be more efficient and economical. The poor, they argued, might be able to grow their own food and work to contribute to their own care (often ignoring the fact that most of the paupers were infirm). Poor farms, well organized and managed by a single superintendent, would remove the poor from morally unhealthy social influences and provide a positive moral and temperate environment. Poor farms would also promote personal industry and allow the poor to receive better care in comfortable, permanent homes instead of being moved annually from family to family.

As time went by, poor farms exhibited their own flaws and failed to fulfill the warmest expectations of proponents. By the mid-20th century, most of them had closed. Society today continues to search for a “better” way, and to debate the merits and drawbacks of private versus institutional care for those in need of public assistance.

NOTES

All quotations in italics are from Josiah Quincy, *Massachusetts, General Court, Committee on Pauper Laws* [Boston, Printed by Russell and Gardner, 1821], 7.