

# **My Voice, My Vote Pre-Visit Classroom Lesson Plan**

## **Overview**

Students will explore how society provides for the poor in early 19th-century rural New England as they participate in the democratic process. **The information in this lesson has been developed to use in the classroom prior to a field study at Old Sturbridge Village where students will participate in the program *My Voice, My Vote*.**

At the museum, students interview Villagers to gather different points of view on whether or not the town should continue the current Vendue system of caring for the poor or switch to a new method- the Poor Farm. To conclude, students join a costumed moderator at the Center Meetinghouse to debate and vote on the issue.

## **Objectives**

Students will:

1. Understand responsibilities of citizenship.
  2. Learn the function of town meetings through primary source documents and participation in a mock town meeting.
  3. Become familiar with the options towns had for taking care of their poor in early nineteenth-century New England.
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## **Introduction to Town Government**

### **Description**

*The authority and responsibilities of government are vital issues in our society. As the needs of people change, so do the demands and expectations placed upon our government.*

1. Begin with a class discussion. Ask your students, "What is government?" List responses on a chart.

Develop the idea that the purpose of government is:

- To accomplish certain tasks
- To control and direct the actions of the inhabitants of a given community

2. Why do we need town government? List responses on a chart. Develop ideas that we need government to:

- Protect people and property
- Provide needed services

3. What are the responsibilities of citizens to local town government?

## **Lesson Activity 1: Poor Relief**

### **Description**

*One issue that consistently shows up on early nineteenth-century town meeting records is that of poor relief. By careful examination of primary sources consisting of public records, students will prepare for a mock town meeting at Old Sturbridge Village where they will have to decide how to provide for the town's poor.*

1. Begin by having students read the **Activity 1 Primary Source documents- "Petitions for Poor Relief in**

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**the Town of Sturbridge, Town Records.”** These documents provide first-hand accounts of some of the problems people faced in early nineteenth-century New England.

- Note: It is important that your students understand that asking for full support from the town is a last resort and a person would forfeit all worldly assets in order to receive relief.

2. Have a class discussion about the difficulties encountered by those needing relief and those providing it.

3. Compare and contrast how we provide relief for the poor in America today.

3. Brainstorm possible ways for a 19<sup>th</sup> century town to support the poor. Make a list of student ideas on the board or chart paper. Encourage students to think about how each might be funded.

### **Lesson Activity 2:**

#### **Description**

*Students will investigate early 19<sup>th</sup> century methods of poor relief as well as the proposed town farm, another term for poor farm, in order to discuss, defend their point of view, and vote on the articles at town meeting.*

*At the town meeting, one of the articles on the warrant will be to see if the town will approve the purchase of a farm to be used as a poor farm for the town's paupers. Remember that students won't be able to introduce any other option that is not on the warrant.*

*An overview about the attitudes toward the poor during the early 1800s is provided in the article, "Historical Background on the Poor and Poor Relief in Early 19th-Century New England."*

1. Overview of modes of caring for the poor in early nineteenth-century Massachusetts:
  - Vendue system (contracted out to lowest bidder)
  - One contractor (one individual is responsible for all the town's poor)
  - Outdoor relief (help provided to individuals in their own home)
  - Poor farm (sometimes called indoor relief; one town-owned dwelling for all of the town's poor)
2. Break students into 4 groups. Assign each group one of the following towns: Duxbury, Danvers, Beverly or Pepperell. Have students read the **Activity 2 Primary Source Documents** for their group number and make a list of reasons for and against support for a poor farm. Have each group report out and discuss their findings with the whole class.

#### **Conclusion**

Have a class discussion to brainstorm possible questions to ask the costumed historians during their field trip to Old Sturbridge Village.