



# Poor Relief in the Early America

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## Poor Relief in Early America

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### Introduction

Early American patterns of publicly funded poor relief emerged mainly from the English heritage of early settlers. The policies and practices of aiding the poor current in England when the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts were shaped primarily by the [Elizabethan Poor Laws](#) of 1594 and 1601, and the Law of Settlement and Removal of 1662. The English poor laws classified poor/dependent people into three major categories and established a requirement for “residency” before aid was provided. Dependent persons were categorized as: vagrant, the involuntary unemployed and the helpless. In effect, the poor laws separated the poor into two classes: the worthy (e.g., orphans, widows, handicapped, frail elderly) and the unworthy (e.g., drunkards, shiftless, lazy). The poor laws also set down the means for dealing with each category of needy persons and established the parish (i.e., local government) as the responsible agent for administering the law. Parish officials were given the authority to raise taxes as needed and use the funds to build and manage almshouses; to supply food and sustenance in their own homes for the aged and the handicapped, (e.g., blind, crippled); and to purchase materials necessary to put the able-bodied to work. If vagrants or able-bodied persons refused to work they could be put in jail.

The preamble to the English Law of Settlement and Removal of 1662 claimed that large numbers of indigent persons were moving to those rural communities where more liberal poor relief was provided to the needy. This law was enacted to permit local authorities to “eject” from their parish an individual or family who might become dependent. The law also authorized local authorities to “pass along” or “remove” persons who could not prove they had contributed to the well being of the parish by their labor or paying taxes.

In time, colonial legislatures and later State governments adopted legislation patterned after these English laws, establishing the American tradition of public responsibility for the care of the destitute while also requiring evidence of legal residence in a particular geographic locality (i.e., town, municipality, county) as a prerequisite for receiving assistance. The most popular means for caring for the poor in early American communities using public funds included: the contract system, auction of the poor, the poorhouse, and relief in the home, or “outdoor relief.” The contract system

placed dependent persons under the care of a homeowner or farmer who offered to care for them for a lump sum. The process of “auctioning” the destitute resulted in an individual or family being placed with a local couple or family bidding the lowest amount of public funding needed to care for them. It should be noted the contract system and auctioning the poor were not prevalent outside rural or lightly populated areas. Part of the reason was evidence that the practice of entrusting the care of the poor to the lowest bidder essentially legalized abusive behavior and near starvation existence.

## **Poorhouses**

The most prevalent means of caring for the poor with public funds in early America were poorhouses and outdoor relief. The major advantages for a locality funding a poorhouse (sometimes labeled an almshouse or workhouse) to care for dependent persons were: the necessity of working every day would be a deterrent for able bodied persons who were simply lazy or shiftless; and the regimen of daily life in a congregate setting would instill habits of economical and virtuous living in persons who were destitute because of moral weakness or self-indulgence. The facts revealed that only a small proportion of residents were able-bodied, and then usually in the winter months when jobs were scarce. In many areas, poorhouses became a refuge for the sick, the severely disabled, frail elderly and homeless children who were unable to work and had no one to care for them. Complicating the use of a poorhouse for the care of all destitute persons was the necessary mixing of the worthy and the unworthy poor. Often living in the same congregate setting were able-bodied adults as well as dependent persons such as children, the aged, the sick and the disabled. Eventually, separate facilities were established to care for the different populations, with the able-bodied being placed in a “workhouse” or “poor farm.”

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the conditions and reputation of poorhouses had deteriorated significantly. There was growing evidence of unseemly rates of death and disease, illicit births, lack of discipline, graft, and mismanagement. Perhaps worst of all, the costs of maintaining poorhouses increased beyond the expectations and promises of public officials. It soon became apparent to some public officials that it would be less expensive to provide some public assistance to the community’s dependent persons living with friends or relatives, or while living in their own homes.

## **Outdoor Relief**

The nature and amount of outdoor relief varied widely in early America but it was seldom generous or widely available. The concept of public assistance conflicted with Calvinist values and was sometimes viewed as impinging on the personal gratifications derived from private works of charity. The beginning of a more general acceptance of the role of outdoor relief was revealed by an 1857 report of a New York Senate, “Select Committee to Visit Charitable and Penal Institutions.”

“...A still more efficient and economical auxiliary in supporting the poor, and in the prevention of absolute pauperism consists in the opinion of the committee, in the proper and systematic distribution of “out door” relief. Worthy indigent persons should, if possible, be kept from the degradation of the poor house, by reasonable supplies of provisions, bedding, and other absolute necessities, at their own homes. Half the sum requisite for their maintenance in the poor house would often save them from destitution, and enable them to work in their households and their vicinity, sufficiently to earn the remainder of their support during the inclement season when

indigence suffers the most, and when it is most likely to be forced into the common receptacles of pauperism, whence it rarely emerges without a loss of self respect and a sense of degradation...”

Despite the societal and religious values prevalent in this period of American history, opponents of outdoor relief found it difficult to argue in support of poor houses as a more suitable solution for helping relieve the economic distress of the aged, severely handicapped, widows and orphaned children. Further contributing to the acceptance of public assistance in the form of outdoor relief was the emergence of urban areas as centers of labor during the 19th Century. Several economic depressions and other business turndowns resulted in large numbers of the able-bodied being unemployed with no money with which to buy needed food and clothing for themselves or their families. Large numbers of unemployed workers often participated in demonstrations and protests of one kind or another. Others became violent. It was during these episodes of unrest that local public officials responded with various types of public employment programs, soup kitchens, and other forms of public financed charity designed to quell the protests or stabilize the environment.

**Editor’s Note:** The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City contains a wealth of information about the poorhouse and outdoor relief in New York City, as well as interesting details and accounts about their operating budgets during the 1930s. For more information, visit [http://www.tenement.org/encyclopedia/social\\_outdoor.htm](http://www.tenement.org/encyclopedia/social_outdoor.htm).

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