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**Almshouse, Workhouse, Outdoor Relief:
Responses to the Poor in Southeastern Massachusetts,
1740-1800**

By

Jennifer Turner

In Duxbury, Massachusetts, local folklore emphasizes that before the current Surplus Street was named, it was called Poverty Lane because it led to the “poor” farm, and before it was Poverty Lane, local residents knew it as Folly Street, over which one’s folly led to the Almshouse.¹ Although such local folklore suggests a rather stringent attitude towards giving alms to the poor in colonial society, the issue of poor relief absorbed much of the attention of town officials before and after the American Revolution. Throughout the colonial period and early republic, many Massachusetts towns faced growing numbers of needy men, women and children in need of relief. There were two common ways the problem of poverty was addressed.

One form was outdoor relief, which took the form either of handouts of cash and provisions or an arrangement to board individual paupers with private families for a specified time. A second way of aiding the poor, which developed in many towns especially from the 1750’s onward, was to build poorhouses, workhouses, or town farms where people would work for the town for their support. The blending of these two methods in the colonial period was ultimately eclipsed as

¹ Dorothy Wentworth, *Growth and Settlement of Duxbury, Massachusetts, 1628-1870* (Duxbury, MA: Duxbury Historical Commission, 1973), 58.

almshouses and workhouses emerged in the nineteenth century as the dominant form of public relief for the indigent. The poor working for “their keep” reflected society’s attitude toward helping the poor and the place of the needy in society.

This paper surveys the poor relief policies adopted by towns in Plymouth County, Massachusetts. It documents changing approaches to poor relief in rural, rather than urban, communities. Specifically, this paper addresses these questions. During the transitional period from 1750 to the early nineteenth century, how prevalent were workhouses in local communities? Although much of the historiography to date has dealt with poorhouses in urban areas, how did poor relief measures evolve in small towns? Did policies evolve in linear fashion, or were there frequent policy shifts back and forth from the various methods? Did rural towns and cities adopt similar methods at the same time? What circumstances caused them to adopt different measures? Furthermore, this paper offers a comparison of an urban jurisdiction, Boston, with two small towns in Plymouth County, Bridgewater and Duxbury, both of which constructed poorhouses in the eighteenth century to show how poor relief policies evolved throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century outside of a major urban area. In addition, this paper will attempt to reconstruct the lives and experiences of individual poor people. Often ignored in discussions of the social causes of poverty in society, the poor were the ones primarily affected by poor relief practices. Individual stories can often provide data concerning the types of people directly impacted by poor relief policies. Admittedly, data is often sketchy at best, but addressing this aspect of indigenous life is important.

In recent years, the issues of poverty and poor relief have not gone unnoticed by colonial American historians. In the past twenty years, dozens of books and articles have been written about the extent of poor relief and the role of transient poor people in the social hierarchy of society. The literature about the poor in colonial New England not only reflects English attitudes inherited from the mother country, it also underscores the emphasis on urban communities rather than rural agrarian towns as a focus of study.

When tracing the development of poor relief policy, it is important to consider the manner in which English attitudes about poor relief influenced the settlers who brought with them a conditional blueprint for emulating English society in the New World. Edmund S. Morgan and

Robert Kelso discuss the transformation of English social attitudes about the poor in colonial life, specifically in the rise of settlement and poor laws in colonial political laws. Hardly complimentary in their view towards the poor, the English characterized them as “vicious, idle dissolute, miserable, diseased, ignorant, and seditious.”² As early as 1576, English society viewed some system of involuntary servitude as a possible solution to the growing number of poor in England, hence, laws provided for the construction of houses of correction to place the poor to work. By 1660, workhouses had become more popular. The institution emphasized the contribution poor persons’ labor, spinning wool or flax, could make for the betterment of the nation. Morgan emphasizes that “proponents of workhouses saw them as educational institutions where the poor, and especially the children of the poor, would learn habits of work.”³ The intention of the workhouse’s structure was to provide discipline to the poor, and although such attitudes and the resultant implementation stopped short of actual slavery, the poor continued to be regarded as socially inferior throughout English society.

Colonial society was continually influenced by English custom in regards to poor relief practices. In his survey of poor relief in Massachusetts, Robert Kelso has demonstrated that settlement laws and poor laws, as well as general social attitudes towards the poor, were strongly influenced by English practices. Massachusetts’s society adopted poor laws based on tenets of English common law. Settlement laws designated a particular term of legal residency, in a jurisdiction prior to the conferring of local rights of obligatory “for determining jurisdictional responsibility for public expenditures made on account of persons in distress.”⁴ Thus, settlement laws were important in establishing legal residency requirements for repetitive inhabitants of towns. In order to qualify for poor relief in a colonial town or city, the individual had to be legally settled in the town, and have no immediate kin, such as sons and daughters, or parents, who could afford to support

² Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975), 320.

³ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁴ Robert Kelso, *The History of Public Poor Relief in Massachusetts, 1620-1920* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1934), 35.

him or her. The first major poor relief law, passed in 1692, permitted town officials to employ the poor, send them to houses of correction if they refused, and bind their children out as apprentices.⁵ The 1692 law became the basis for future decisions in the approaches of dealing with the poor. Besides the 1692 law, approaches to poor relief reflected changes in society.

Poor relief and other issues regarding the poor loomed large in the business of provincial legislatures and town selectmen partly because of the practical issue of rising numbers of poor people, but also because societal attitudes inherited from England, drove local authority figures to worry about the poor and idle. Colonial society, like its English counterpart, worried about the disruptive impact the poor would have on the social hierarchy. Consequently, colonial society increasingly adopted the warning out system of its English ancestry. The warning out system was designed to restrict entry or settlement into a town, and to make sure that those individuals who were not already legal residents could not easily meet residency requirements.⁶ Although the warning out system is not directly linked to poor relief, the mechanism reflected colonial attitudes and anxieties about the poor.

Despite the fact that many colonial poor laws, including the apprenticeship of poor children and the erection of almshouses, were similar to those of English custom, the two systems were administered in markedly different manners. David Rothman argues in his book on the creation of asylums in the United States that poor relief practices in England were “a set of bewildering procedures...poor relief in English towns was anything but casual in dispensing relief.”⁷ By contrast, American poor relief was often dispensed informally, even casually. Rothman contends that the American poor relief system adopted various methods of poor relief, although outdoor relief was the most common, as communities in the colonial period wished to avoid institutional relief.

⁵ Massachusetts Province Laws, 1692-1699, 25.

⁶ Josiah Benton, *Warning Out in New England, 1656-1817* (Boston: By author, 1911), 36.

⁷ David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971), 32.

Likewise, colonial attitudes towards the poor were never as inflexible as English interpretations were. Indeed, New England society accepted the poor as an undesired, but pragmatic reality of society. David Rothman characterizes colonial attitudes towards the poor as an “easy acceptance” of poverty within local communities.⁸ Furthermore, while colonial statutes and town by-laws often spoke definitively about policy towards the poor, in practice local policies were more fluid and flexible. For example, even though Anglo-American ideology adhered to a strict conceptual line between the able-bodied poor (“idle” folk who often refused to work) and the infirm poor (those deserving of aid), in practice, colonial policy, including institutions such as Boston’s almshouse and workhouse often supported both categories. Also, when selectmen in a rural town like Duxbury, Massachusetts, ordered that “all” the town’s poor be kept in a new poor house, this was more a dream than a reality. Overall, rather than adhering strictly to the statewide “disciplinary” policy towards offenders, ultimately local authorities and families and the poor themselves often shaped modes of treatment.⁹ Hence, although the broad outlines of poor relief practices were based on English tradition, the daily implementation of poor relief in American society was tempered by everyday colonial experience.

Most scholarship has focused on the nature of poor relief in colonial cities and seaports, and not in rural and interior towns. Historians, such as Gary B. Nash and Douglas Lamar Jones, have written major works on urban centers within colonial Massachusetts. A central sub-theme of much of their works is the role of poverty and transients within these urban communities. Lamar-Jones coined the term “strolling poor” as a catch phrase for a new type of person who appeared during the generation prior to the American Revolution. He and others have demonstrated that a feminization of poverty occurred during the period. An ever growing proportion of women, or women-headed households, became impoverished in urban areas.¹⁰ Nash argues that women and

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 23.

¹⁰ Douglas Lamar Jones, “The Strolling Poor: Transiency in 18th Century Massachusetts,” *Journal of Social History*, v. 8 (1975), 28-54.

children were often forced to enter workhouses because many towns, including Boston, were reticent to apply large amounts of out relief to an increasing population of poor people within the city.¹¹

Nash's essay entitled "Urban Wealth and Poverty" emphasizes that the concentration of wealth in the hands of an entrepreneurial class did not benefit all ranks of society. The evidence suggests that life in urban seaports was changing profoundly in the eighteenth century.¹² Colonial wars and the pressure of an expanding population on land resources, increasingly contributed in the growth of poverty throughout the colonial period. Historical scholarship has also revealed a nineteenth century society determined to reform social practices concerning relief of the poor in the beginning of the nineteenth century. David Rothman's book, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, argues that poverty was a minor problem for much of the eighteenth century, with poor relief mainly taking the format of home assistance, or outdoor relief. According to Rothman, the few existing almshouses had a family quality to them, with the master and his family providing a kind of support system. These eighteenth century almshouses, in Rothman's portrait, were not as impersonal as their nineteenth century counterparts. The early 1800's, however, witnessed a widespread adoption of the almshouse system, a transition which stemmed from the view that poverty needed to be eradicated from society. By the beginning of the Jacksonian period, the almshouse had become a staple of society's public welfare system.¹³

Unlike David Rothman, later historians have argued that the almshouse became a fixture of American society long before the Jacksonian period. In fact, Robert E. Cray argues in his book on poor relief in New York that many rural towns erected workhouses and poorhouses before the American Revolution. Cray emphasizes that rural areas were willing to experiment with changing welfare practices, and

¹¹ Gary B. Nash, "Female Factory Labor in Boston," in *Race, Class, and Politics: Essays on American Colonial and Revolutionary Society* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 123.

¹² Gary B. Nash, "Urban Wealth and Poverty," in *Ibid.*, 197.

¹³ Rothman, 56.

did not lag far behind colonial cities in implementing workhouses for the poor.¹⁴

In addition to examining systems or approaches in addressing the needs of the poor, historians have attempted to reconstruct the individual life stories of those marked as “poor.” Emphasis has been placed upon the consideration of the social dynamic between those receiving aid and the authorities who dispensed the aid to those individuals, specifically the overseers of the poor. Until recently, few historians have actively tried to reconstruct the experiences of individual paupers. Edward Cook’s book on office holders within New England towns, while not directly mentioning poor relief, illustrates the dynamic created by the interaction between town officials and the poor in towns. He delineates the general characteristics of typical selectmen and overseers of the poor, suggesting that men of wealth or those linked to the early proprietors of the town generally attained such positions. Such men relished decision making rules and the consequent ability to exercise power over the less fortunate in the town.¹⁵ Other historians, including Ruth Herndon and Robert Cray, have tried to go even further than Cook by attempting to identify how and why local poverty developed, as well as investigating the lives of individual poor persons.¹⁶

The search in local records for individual paupers’ stories, while attempting to glean from such personal stories larger societal attitudes towards the poor, have demonstrated that colonial communities were more diverse in their attitudes to poor relief than first thought. The approaches to poor relief in town records frequently indicates that tension existed between those in a higher social position, such as town clerks, and those to whom their efforts at assistance were directed, the often anonymous and sometimes nameless poor. Thus, this “social

¹⁴ Robert E. Cray, *Paupers and Poor Relief in New York Cities and its Rural Environs* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 99.

¹⁵ Edward S. Cook, *The Fathers of the Town: Leadership and Community Structure in 18th Century Massachusetts* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), xv.

¹⁶ Ruth Herndon, “The Power of the Clerk: Rethinking 18th Century Town Records,” presented at the Micro-History Conference at the University of Connecticut, Fall 199.

history of the poor” is an essential tool in interpreting colonial attitudes towards the poor and poor individuals’ place in the larger social community. Therefore, my paper builds on the work of previous historians, but concentrates primarily on the rural communities so often ignored in place of more populous and urban communities.

Although the problem of poverty was not as great in eighteenth century America as in England, colonial society and its administration struggled with the issue of poor relief in urban communities. Because the colonists believed that the poor must work and that idleness led to sin, all of the major colonial cities, including New York, Philadelphia and Boston, built workhouses where the able-bodied could work. The data for Boston, while not as detailed as that of other colonial cities, indicates that town officials made several attempts to employ the poor in an institutional setting before the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In 1686, Boston erected a poor house in order to provide “the necessary support of those that are sick, aged, and incapacitated for labor.”¹⁷ Before 1686, all poor relief had been given as out-relief. The late seventeenth century poorhouse, located on Beacon Street, was expanded in the early eighteenth century, precipitated by the city’s rising poor population, which had led to overcrowding. By 1738, another building was constructed near Beacon and School streets to be used as a workhouse. Town officials intended the poorhouse to receive the aged, sick and impotent poor, while the new workhouse would house the able-bodied poor who could be put to work to defray the cost of their upkeep.¹⁸ Massachusetts law also permitted the Boston almshouse to take in “strangers” not having legal settlement in Massachusetts and support them “on the province account” and not at the city’s expense.¹⁹ In their early attempts at constructing public institutions for the poor, Boston officials emphasized in the city records that the terms poorhouse and workhouse were used for separate institutions. However, it is not

¹⁷ Stephen Wilberly, Jr. “Four Cities: Public Poor Relief in Urban America, 1700-1775,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1975), 88.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁹ *Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, vol. 3, Chapter 18, 1742-3* (Boston: Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts).

always as clear in later town records that such is the case. The term poorhouse in Boston's early records indicated an institution for paupers who could not work, while the workhouse housed paupers who were able to work; such distinctions overtime often became blurred with the terms being used interchangeably to describe the houses.

The abundance of poor relief records for Boston, in addition to the often detailed commentary provided by the overseers of the poor in ledgers provides an opportunity for historians to reconstruct the workhouse environment from the perspective of the inmates. Drawing on data, which includes the physical dimensions of the building, the house rules, and the ledgers of the workhouse, a realistic portrayal of inmates' daily experiences can be constructed and interpreted.

Boston's workhouse was primarily run by a master and his wife, whose sons and daughters may have helped in the daily tasks. Although the overseers of the poor supervised the master and his wife, the day-to-day management of the workhouse remained outside the overseers' purview. The Boston workhouse was a two-story building, 140 feet long and 20 feet wide with a cellar. The main floor contained a common hall, 32 feet long and five smaller rooms, which the master and his family often occupied. The second floor had nine chambers, and the common hall was used for prayers and meals.²⁰ A fence running along the border of the grounds completed the workhouse's architecture. Records from the workhouse indicate that when individuals ran away from the poorhouse, they often "jumped the fence," a wording that may signify the fence acted as a barrier to prevent individuals from leaving the grounds without permission.²¹ In October 1739, the town approved "Rules and Orders for the Management of the Workhouse in Boston." These rules reveal that most workhouse inmates were set to labor picking oakum, but records also indicate that a variety of Boston artisans, including tailors and shoemakers, may have used the inhabitants of the workhouse as a cheap labor force.²² While meals and prayers were the subjects of written rules, other rules of the house made some effort to put

²⁰ Wiberly, 98.

²¹ Cray, 45.

²² Records of the Overseers of the Town of Boston, Reel 12, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

the inmates on a timed and disciplined schedule. Breakfast was served between eight and nine in the morning, dinner between twelve and one, and supper between six and seven. Inmates ate dinner in a common room, although other meals could be taken in their rooms. Scripture lessons, read by the master of the house, occurred twice a day, in the morning and evening. Residents were not allowed to smoke in their beds, were prohibited from begging and were not permitted to leave the house without proper liberty. Punishments were meted out for a variety of offenses, including faking illness and failing to perform assigned work.²³

Therefore, the daily regimen of inmates' routines appeared strict; yet, their experiences provide some clues to the attitude of colonial society towards the poor. Although the rules of the workhouses, delivered verbally to the inmates once a week, were formalized and structured, the internal routine of the workhouse functioned much like that of an ordinary household. The master and his family lived within the institution itself, and although the structure was often larger than an ordinary house, it was run in a fashion comparable to the functioning of most average colonial households. Furthermore, overseers of the poor visited the house frequently to deal with any concerns or complaints made by inmates within the house.²⁴ While the workhouse was modeled after colonial family life, however, it also was far more impersonal, because the almshouse was designed to reduce the cost of poor relief. Therefore, the workhouse continually vacillated between the compassion inherent in colonial attitudes about poor relief and the larger issue of public control of both paupers and financial cost.

The master and mistress of the house each had distinctive duties to perform. The master regulated the work schedule; he was often in charge of curfews and bedtimes (ten o'clock in the summer and nine o'clock in the winter season), while the mistress of the house was responsible for the maintenance and cleanliness of the house. The mistress was responsible for the regulation of rooms, making sure "that the rooms were swept and beds made everyday...that the windows were frequently opened for airing the house, that the house be washed as often as shall be judged necessary, and that the table linens and dishes be clean, and that people be clean and neat in apparel and have clean linen

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

once every week and the bed shifted every summer.”²⁵ Like those of other colonial households, workhouse rules emphasized cleanliness, presumably because of the expanding population of the household and the frequent turnover. Fear of small pox and fear of the spread of disease may also have contributed to the cleanliness emphasis in the written rules. The effectiveness of these written rules, in reality, however, is debatable.

While the master and his family shared most of the room on the first floor of the almshouse, the second floor was primarily used for the inmates. The building was capable of housing fifty-four inmates, although when full the house would have been considered crowded. According to colonial records during the 1750’s, inspections by overseers of the poor usually discovered approximately forty inmates.²⁶ Between 1764-1769, the Boston workhouse admitted 174 men, 236 women, and 72 children.²⁷ Their residence in the almshouse was usually brief, the average stay being roughly two years or less, as they moved or were moved on to other towns or died in the almshouse. The larger number of women residents also indicated that the workhouses and almshouses of Boston took the most desperate and dependent cases. Unmarried mothers and widowed mothers with children, able to work but unable to function normally in colonial society, were frequent inmates of the almshouse.

Although institutionalization eventually became the primary method of poor relief for Boston, unlike many other colonial cities, the city did not phase out outdoor relief entirely until the end of the colonial period. Admissions to the almshouse increased rapidly throughout the colonial period, but space limitations in the almshouse and workhouse precipitated colonial leaders to continue to support large numbers of people on outdoor relief. The records of Samuel Whitwell, a Boston overseer of the poor, reveal that in the years 1769-1772, about fifteen percent of the poor in his wards received out-relief.²⁸ If Boston relied

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Wilberly, 98.

²⁷ Rothman, 38.

²⁸ Nash., 185.

more on outdoor relief than other colonial cities, the city still depended heavily on their poorhouse, however. It was only after 1750, when, as noted by Steven Wilberly, the city began to decrease outdoor relief and placed more paupers in the poorhouse, hoping to minimize costs as well as to provide care.²⁹ However, despite this ever growing reliance on institutional relief, it can be argued that workhouses and almshouses were not as effective as colonial authorities might have wished them to be in these respects. Workhouse labor did not significantly decrease town expenditures; indeed, Boston's overall relief bill continued to increase each year.³⁰ By the end of the colonial period, it was more difficult to gain community support for a plan to employ the poor than it had been in the first half of the century. Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest that the able-bodied poor who labored in the workhouses were transformed into productive, functioning members of colonial society. The mixed lessons of Boston's experiences with the poor, however, did not discourage other towns and cities from experimenting with various poor relief practices throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Other large towns in Massachusetts used the rules of the Boston workhouse as their models. For example, Salem adopted the exact same rules as those provided by the Boston Overseers of the Poor, a fact that emphasizes the importance placed on the strict maintenance of the poor in urban communities.³¹ Boston served as an important example to other New England communities demonstrating the effectiveness of experimenting with various methods of poor relief, in both institutional and outdoor forms. Unlike Boston, which had the financial resources to build more than one public institution for the poor, many towns in New England only built one institution, either a workhouse or an almshouse.

Plymouth County is one of fourteen counties located in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It is located less than thirty miles from Boston, and is separated from Boston, by Norfolk County. It has

²⁹ Wilberly, 77.

³⁰ Ibid., 109.

³¹ Douglas Lamar Jones, "The Transformation of Law and Poverty in 18th-century Massachusetts," in *Law in Colonial Massachusetts, 1630-1800* (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1984), 168.

twenty-three towns within its borders and is over five hundred square miles wide.³² The oldest town in Plymouth County is the county seat of Plymouth, and beginning in 1637 various other towns were established by the proprietors of Plymouth Colony. The first two inland settlements of the Plymouth settlers, Bridgewater and Duxbury share a particularly complex history of various experiments in poor relief practices throughout the colonial period.

In 1637, a second town was incorporated into Plymouth Colony. Originally called the Duxbury Plantation, but eventually shortened to Duxbury, this new settlement was given the full privilege of a town by the court, and it encompassed portions of what are Duxbury, Bridgewater, East Bridgewater, Brockton, and West Bridgewater. Eventually, twenty years after Duxbury had been legalized as town, Bridgewater broke from Duxbury and became a separate town as well. At the turn of the seventeenth century, Bridgewater had a little more than two hundred families within the community, and Duxbury had over one thousand residents.³³ The basis of each town's economy was quite dissimilar; Bridgewater was primarily a rural agrarian community, while Duxbury's proximity to the ocean brought with it a reliance on fishing and shipbuilding for economic support.³⁴ By the 1750's, both towns had become prosperous and well populated. Such population expansion led to the creation of four distinct parishes in Bridgewater by 1738. A colonial census in 1764 recorded roughly four thousand adults in Bridgewater.³⁵ The population of Duxbury, while significantly smaller than that of Bridgewater, also increased during the period to around one thousand-five hundred adults. Such population increases, in addition to the expanding commercial ventures within both towns, may have led to the creation of poor houses in both towns in the period prior to and after the American Revolution.

³² Wentworth, 23.

³³ David K. Wilson, *The East Bridgewater Sesquicentennial 1823-1973* (East Bridgewater, Massachusetts: East Bridgewater Sesquicentennial, Inc., 1973), 15-26.

³⁴ Wentworth, 37.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

During the colonial period, most towns, other than Boston and Salem, used out door relief as the primary method of public assistance to the poor. Out-door relief usually meant that needy individuals would be boarded or “kept” by local families. The family provided basic necessities, such as housing, food, and shelter. The town meeting reports demonstrate the manner in which local government functioned and which issues were pertinent to the townspeople. The records also provide a window to the role of the poor in local communities and the manner in which they were viewed. A portrait of the impoverished as members of the community but consigned to the fringes due to a lack of social status, emerges. Financially constrained, supported by the community, the presence of poor persons in official town records illustrates the town’s perceived responsibility to bring order to the lives of those living on the social margins of the community.

This paper analyzes the eight towns within Plymouth County which were founded prior to 1800. Some similarities occurred concerning the recording of poor relief rolls in specific towns. In general, poor relief entries were less frequent prior to 1740, but increased as the century continued. Women were far more likely to appear on poor relief rolls, and were generally extended aid for longer periods of time than men.

Only one town, Pembroke, had more men than women on their relief rolls prior to 1740, although their records for the post-1740 period are scarce.³⁶ The records indicate that over a twenty-year period, more than twenty-five individuals appeared on the poor relief rolls, eighteen men and seven women. One possible reason for this aberration, however, could be the fragmentary nature of the records in the town.

Two men, in particular, appear in the Pembroke Records throughout the first two decades of the eighteenth century. William Tubbs, who died in 1718 at the age of 63, appeared on the public rolls for more than six years before his death. Although he received public relief and was boarded by various members of the town, including members of his family, he was also a man who owned property. A year before his death in 1717, the town held a special town meeting to auction off land that had been owned by Tubbs. There is no indication in the records whether or not his land was sold due to debts. Likewise, it is unclear whether or not debts prompted his boarding. Thomas Wilmore, too, was boarded

³⁶ Pembroke Town Records, 1712-1800, January 7, 1715, Pembroke Town Hall, Pembroke, Massachusetts.

out by the selectmen of the town. The wording of the agreement, however, is unusual in that it ordered that “twenty shillings be paid annually to Nehemiah Cushing for a house for the said Wilmore to dwell in provided that said Cushing provides a house and keeps the same in good repair and is to the expectations and satisfaction of the above Thomas Wilmore.”³⁷ In 1724, Cushing was paid “house rent to Thomas Wilmore.”³⁸

The conditions and wording of these entries are unusual in that both Tubbs and Wilmore are given a respect that is often lacking in town reports on the poor. Most town records contain only fragmentary notes on individuals, often only a line or two, whereas these two cases offer more information concerning the circumstances of these individuals. Also, recent scholarship and other studies demonstrate that in early modern times, the poor were often housed according to their station or class. Overall, there is not enough data to determine whether or not Tubbs and Wilmore were gentlemen who had become poor. However, the respect inherent in the reports on their condition may indicate that at least in the eighteenth century, authorities ordered that individuals be relieved or boarded according to their station in life. In other words, although there is no specific indication of this in the town records, if William Tubbs were a gentleman or educated person, the clothes made for him would be more expensive than those for an impoverished laborer.

Indeed, most town clerks referred to the poor, people of color, and children by their first name only, reserving last names for more prosperous inhabitants of the town. Records from Duxbury and Bridgewater illustrate this phenomenon. In Duxbury, Jane Delanoe and Mary Cole received aid over an extended period of years. Although no birth record of Jane Delanoe exists in Duxbury records, the town supported her for more than twenty-six years at the expense of the town. She first appeared in the town records in 1739, when she was fifty-four years old, and was supported until her death at the age of eighty in 1765. Although no marriage records exist for her, and it is unclear whether Delanoe was her birth or married name, members of the Delanoe family in Duxbury, presumably relatives, boarded her. Over the years, however, as she appeared in the official record, her name at

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

various times was shortened from Jane Delanoe to Jane to eventually “old Jane.”³⁹ The last entry for her in 1765 refers to “the funeral expenses and a coffin for Old Jane.” The fact that she belonged to a fairly prominent family in Duxbury did not protect Jane Delanoe from becoming a peripheral member of the poor in colonial society.

Another woman who appears frequently in the town records was also connected to the Delanoe family through marriage. Mary Cole was born in 1682 and had an older sister named Sarah who married John Delanoe in 1708. When Cole was fifty-two years old, her sister, “the widow Delanoe” boarded her as a town pauper. There is no marriage or death notice listed for Mary Cole, and although she was boarded at one time by a member of her family, she was also boarded for a period of fifteen years by one individual, Joseph Freeman, beginning when he was forty years old.⁴⁰

Individuals in other towns, however, were often not so fortunate to be boarded by family members or for extended periods of time by the same individual. In Bridgewater, many women were moved from house to house, sometimes living only a few weeks at a time with a family before being moved to another household. Although Hannah Leonard had an extended family of at least nine brothers and sisters in Bridgewater, she was boarded with various other members of the town community. She appears sporadically throughout the Bridgewater poor relief records, beginning in 1750, when she would have been approximately thirty-seven years old. Although her death was listed in 1768, when she would have been fifty-five years old, she appeared on the poor relief records only throughout the 1750’s. There is no indication that she received poor relief in the 1760’s, so an assumption could be made that she moved out of Bridgewater to live with kin and then returned to the town at a future point or found other means of financial support. Deliverance Newman, another woman who also appeared consistently in the Bridgewater records throughout the 1750’s, was

³⁹ Duxbury General Records, 1710-1786, September 12, 1765, Duxbury Town Hall, Duxbury, Massachusetts. Many members of Delanoe’s family served in various town offices throughout the period Delanoe was on poor relief.

⁴⁰ Duxbury General Records, 1710-1786, August 7, 1738, Duxbury Town Hall, Duxbury, Massachusetts.

moved quite frequently within the town. Five or more people boarded Newman in one year in 1755. This pattern of multiple boardings would continue in other years, until Newman disappeared from the public record after 1759.⁴¹ Unlike Duxbury, the Bridgewater method seemed to rotate paupers frequently among town families rather than boarding individuals in one family for an extended period of time.

The experiences of Plymouth County towns suggest larger motives often prompted colonial families to board the poor in rural communities. A variety of motives for families to take in paupers existed. The first was financial benefit; supplemental income from the selectmen as well as casual labor provided by the boarders, was an added bonus to farm families in rural communities. Secondly, beyond the economic benefit for farm families, the cases of Jane Delanoe and Mary Cole suggest that prosperous families might also be motivated by a sense of obligation or emotional attachment. In addition to the fact that family members took in and supported either distant or close relatives, the care of a pauper over a long period of time is indicative of an extension of family life and the family economy. The case of Mary Cole and Joseph Freeman demonstrates that the burden of care was not tied to merely economic factors, but may have represented a closer emotional attachment to the individual as well. Freeman boarded Cole for more than fifteen years, suggesting that emotional attachment might have been a common aspect of the boarding experience in addition to a consistent need for added income. Although Mary Cole's arrangement appeared to provide stability, we cannot conjecture about whether or not Freeman and his family abused her in any way. Thus, while town records can provide basic information concerning individual poor persons, it is also difficult to construct any meaningful connections procured merely from the barest essentials written into the public record.

Moreover, the individuals who appear in Plymouth County on outdoor relief during the colonial period appear to fall into the category of "life-cycle" poverty, i.e., individuals who become impoverished in old age. The majority of individuals named as being boarded out are elderly (there are no young adults listed and only one parent with a child). Otherwise, they are not listed in the town records. Women, such as Jane Delanoe and Mary, were over fifty years old when they became

⁴¹ Bridgewater Town Records, vol. 3, 1738-1784, March 12, 1759, Bridgewater Town Hall, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

recipients of poor relief. Likewise, William Tubbs of Pembroke was in his mid-fifties when neighbors boarded him in town, after his land had been sold at public auction. This pattern demonstrates that in colonial society one was not necessarily born poor and did not occupy the category of poverty-stricken during one's entire lifetime. Instead, due to external circumstances, such as widowhood or an infirmity that would prevent farming or working for wages, one might be placed on poor relief. As John Demos has noted, however, the connotation of "old" itself in colonial society must be examined. Again and again in local records elderly people are mentioned in a special way by using the word old in front of surnames. Their given names, therefore, are in effect discounted and age itself becomes an identifying mark.⁴² Demos points to a list of householders in Watertown, Massachusetts which consisted of ten men of equivalent age delineated, yet only five were designated "old."⁴³ In the Plymouth town records, men like William Tubbs who were apparently wealthy before they entered the poor relief rolls are listed under both their first and surname. Women like Jane Delanoe, were often entered by merely their given name preceded by the adjective of "old." Whether this custom denotes social status or colonial attitudes towards women is unclear, but as Demos indicates the use of the term "old" is as a prefix implicitly pejorative.⁴⁴ Men with status or wealth within the town community are listed by their full names in public records, while men and women who are poor or who are in need of public assistance are often regulated to positions of anonymity.

Other potential groups of dependent persons caused concern among community members. Public welfare was not the sole preserve of white individuals. Although whites received the majority of public assistance, it was not impossible that relief could be given to African-Americans and Native-Americans. As Robert Cray has emphasized, "the available if limited evidence suggests that both groups were liable to require some kind of relief."⁴⁵ Although the evidence is limited for Plymouth County

⁴² John Demos, *Past, Present and Personal: The Family and Life Course in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 171.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁴⁵ Cray., 90.

towns, some entries suggest that while Native Americans and African Americans were apparently not boarded in the towns surveyed, certain individuals were provided with medicine and provisions at the very least. At a town meeting in 1774, Duxbury selectmen voted two pounds to a Dr. Harlow for “doctoring to the poor...and Dr. Chandler was paid one pound for nursing an old squaw.”⁴⁶ Earlier records for the town of Kingston also indicate that medicine and services were provided to Native Americans living in the town. At a town meeting on March 14, 1757, “Jonathon Cushman was paid one pound, five shillings, for medicine and attendance on two Indian Squaws in said town.”⁴⁷ Hence, while it is not clear whether these individuals were boarded out as paupers or not (they do not appear directly on the poor relief lists), they were provided assistance under the auspices of the selectmen of the towns in which they lived. Like the men and women who were referred to as “old” in the town records, however, the Native-Americans who appeared in the local records are listed anonymously. Although age did not apparently become a defining mark of their social status among Native American women, the use of the word “squaw” classifies them not only as women, but by race as well. While poor relief was not explicitly reserved for whites, the classification of individuals in the local records often largely emphasized the social status and race of the man or woman who required assistance from their local communities.

The construction or purchase of a house designed specifically for the use of the poor in towns outside of Boston were a rare occurrence in eighteenth century Massachusetts. Despite being authorized to build poorhouses or workhouses, few towns evidently had the need or resources to do so lacking an explicit mandate.⁴⁸ A 1744 statute, resembling the law enacted to require the erection of a workhouse in Boston, called for the creation of a workhouse by one or more towns, to

⁴⁶ Duxbury Town Records, General Records, 1710-1786, May 16, 1774, Duxbury Town Hall.

⁴⁷ Kingston Town Records, 1726-1800, March 14, 1757, Kingston Town Hall, Kingston, Massachusetts.

⁴⁸ Acts and Resolves of the Province of Massachusetts, vol. 3, 1743-44, Chapter 12, 108.

be overseen by a committee of either selectmen or overseers of the poor. The wording of the law infers that adjacent towns might share a building, although no evidence exists that such an action occurred in the eighteenth century. The law defined specific qualifications for potential inmates, and sought to regulate workhouse labor.⁴⁹ Despite this impetus in provincial law, which promoted the construction of workhouses, only two towns in Plymouth County, Duxbury and Bridgewater, actually established a poor house, even though outdoor relief was not discontinued.

In addition to direct out relief, encompassed in the custodial family model, some towns in Plymouth county experimented with the construction of workhouses for the poor in the eighteenth century. Most rural towns discussed the idea of creating a poorhouse but never pursued the plan to fruition. Plymouth, the county seat, created a committee in 1781 to “discuss whether or not they could get any person or person to keep the poor that are now supported by the town and at what price,” but there is not further evidence in the town records to show that such an action was taken any further.⁵⁰

Although town records indicate that Bridgewater and Duxbury used out relief as the primary method of public assistance to the poor, each town also constructed or purchased a poor or workhouse after the 1750's. Duxbury was the first town to implement a poor house, voting in 1766 to “hire a workhouse to drive the poor of the town into it, and to see all the business related to the poor carried on in it according to the laws of the Province.”⁵¹ The word “drive” denotes an intimation of force in placing people into the poorhouse. It is uncertain why such intimation is used in 1766 and not in later records on poorhouses in the town. One possible reason for the use of the word “drive” is that the poor could have been steadily increasing and causing a larger financial burden for town than that of previous years. It is possible, that the selectmen, anxious over rising costs, chose a stronger word than normal for the placement of individuals into the poorhouse. The house of Amos Sampson was rented

⁴⁹ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁰ Records of the Town of Plymouth, Vol. 3, 1743-1783, Nov. 12, 1781.

⁵¹ Duxbury General Records, 1710-1786, March 24, 1767, Duxbury Town Hall, Duxbury, Massachusetts.

to serve as the workhouse for the poor for two years, but after 1768, the Duxbury workhouse vanishes from the town records for nearly two decades. In 1784, Duxbury again voted to hire a house, so that “all poor person that are helped by the town be put together in the house of Mr. Caleb Oldman...voted that Ezra West is empowered to take care of all the poor and provide for them as his best judgment allowed.”⁵² In 1794, Duxbury’s policies shifted once again. The town chose a committee of three men to determine the fate of the town’s poor. The overseers of the poor decided that individuals supported by the town should be put into one house, provided with suitable clothing, bedding, food, drink, and medicine at the expense of the town. In addition, the labor of the poor was discussed, as it had not been in previous years’ entries. The overseers were required to provide oakum so that the able-bodied poor could be kept at labor. The overseers of the poor in Plymouth County towns were required to inspect the house on a frequent basis accommodating and dealing with complaints from the inmates. These functions mirrored those of their urban counterparts.⁵³

Unlike Duxbury, where pre-existing houses owned by residents were rented, Bridgewater bought and enlarged a private home to serve as a poorhouse for the town. Beginning in 1779, the town voted to “purchase a house in town with convenient yard room of Mr. Jonathan Burr for the reception of the poor at the sum of four hundred and fifty pounds...and voted to make an addition to the said house of eighteen square feet and to put the house in good repair as soon as possible.”⁵⁴ Interestingly, the town purchased its poorhouse from one of the overseers of the poor. Beginning in the 1770’s, Jonathan Burr, an officeholder and extensive landowner, served as an overseer of the poor for more than fifteen years.⁵⁵ After 1779, the almshouse in Bridgewater disappears from the public records until 1790, when a town meeting requested that a

⁵² Duxbury General Records, Vol. 2, 1761-1825, November 8, 1784, Duxbury Town Hall, Duxbury, Massachusetts.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, May 5, 1794.

⁵⁴ Bridgewater Town Records, vol. 4, 1779-1822, October 5, 1779, Bridgewater Town Hall, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

committee be formed to make inquiry about the convenience “to be had for setting a house for the poor of the town near the center of town. Likewise, how firewood and other supplies may be obtained at such a place and for what term of time as well as the condition and circumstances of the present house and to make report to the town at the adjournment of this meeting.”⁵⁶ Ultimately, the town voted not to move the poorhouse. Although the poorhouse does not appear in the town records for the eleven years prior to the formation of the committee to inspect the current poorhouse, by all indications, the poorhouse continued to exist and function within the town during that same period.

The records of the two towns, while providing basic information on the choice of supplementing out relief with a poorhouse, leave central questions unanswered. For example, what were these poorhouses like, why did these towns build poor houses, did the towns differentiate between poorhouses and workhouses, and why for the most part, were these institutions temporary? While there is little direct evidence within the town records in terms of the answers to these questions, using the material from the town reports and a comparison with Boston, some conclusions can be reasonably inferred.

Although there were no specific dimensions for the houses listed in the town records, or in land deeds, most poor houses, as demonstrated by that of Boston, patterned themselves around a family structure. As David Rothman has noted, many towns simply bought or hired a house without making any changes in the room dimensions.⁵⁷ Rural workhouses would presumably house between five and ten individuals at one time. Compared to the Boston workhouse and almshouse (which rivaled the dimensions of the largest city buildings) rural workhouses were far smaller. Also, although the “rules” of the rural workhouses do not survive, we can assume the keeper tried to follow set regulations, including daily schedules for meals and observance of prayer which were similar to those of Boston and Salem. There is also no indication in the records that like Boston, Duxbury and Bridgewater built a fence around the yard of the poorhouses. Because of rural reliance on work patterns which had been prescribed by the larger urban areas, it is likely that the smaller towns would also have constructed a fence around the grounds of

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, October 4, 1790.

⁵⁷ Rothman., 42.

their poorhouses, although there is no indication of this phenomenon preserved in the records.

Despite the fact that Bridgewater and Duxbury used interchangeably the words workhouses or poorhouses in the town records, there seems to be a delineation, at least in Duxbury, that there was a shift towards work for the poor in the smaller towns. Boston's poor inmates worked as part of the structure of the workhouse, and while the earlier models of the workhouse in both towns do not mention labor, by 1794, Duxbury clearly believed that the poor should work for their support. While it is conceivable that inmates of the previous poorhouses in Duxbury may have been put to work, inmate labor is not specifically mentioned in poorhouse records until 1794. Physically able persons were required in order to gain admission to the workhouse to pick oakum. The difference between poorhouses and workhouses in Bridgewater is more ambiguous. In fact, the 1790 reference to the poorhouse strongly indicates that the workhouse might not have been used as it had been originally been designed. The vagueness of the selectmen's assessment of whether or not to continue with the present workhouse or build another one closer to the center of town might indicate that the house had infrequent or sporadic use as a workhouse.

Rural towns apparently used poorhouses not at all or sporadically in the eighteenth century. Unlike Boston, which increasingly relied on institutional relief, the rural towns continued to use outdoor relief in the same ration as before the workhouses were built. Duxbury and Bridgewater records indicate that outdoor relief continued to the same degree as in years when the towns did not employ a poorhouse. Although no registers survive to indicate who went into the workhouse and how long they stayed, presumably paupers on outdoor relief out-numbered those housed in the poorhouse in any given period. If fewer than ten people could live in the almshouse (based on typical architectural designs for houses in the period), and more than ten people were assisted on the outdoor relief rolls, one could assume that the two methods co-existed. Unlike Boston, where increasing population pressure resulted in an overcrowded workhouse, rural communities rarely encountered large outpourings of new residents seeking public assistance.

Entering a workhouse in a small town might also may have appeared socially stigmatizing, particularly to older individuals of the communities who expected to be placed within a family rather than a

public institution. In 1795, one man in Duxbury, who had been a cobbler for thirty years, but could no longer support his wife or himself in their old age, refused to enter the workhouse when town officials notified him they would place him there. Instead, friends and family signed petitions indicating the man's valuable standing within the community. Although the petitions were not entered into the town record, the records indicate that the townspeople used phrases such as "dedicated" and "hardworking" to describe the man, such public support allowed the man and his wife to be placed on outdoor assistance, rather than institutionalized.⁵⁸ The behavior of the man, and his refusal to enter the workhouse, illustrates the emotional attachment between the poor and their potential boarders which was earlier discussed which was in many cases a central part to the institution of outdoor relief in rural areas. This social attachment between both the poor and members of the town community might account for why outdoor and institutional relief continued to exist side by side at least in rural areas during the latter part of the eighteenth century.

There is no concrete answer to the question of why particular towns, resorted to poorhouses in the late eighteenth century while others did not. Duxbury and Bridgewater were both centrally located between the seaports of Plymouth and Boston. Both towns were also larger and more industrialized than other towns in the area. When the workhouses were implemented in the 1770's, there were three thousand and one thousand residents in Bridgewater and Duxbury respectively. Each town contained various manufacturing businesses, including an iron works, a sawmill, and a shovel factory.⁵⁹ The manufacturing areas may have created incentive for residents of other areas to migrate to these towns seeking employment, in spite of settlement laws and increased hostility to newcomers. As a result, financial burdens to the town may have increased exponentially. On the other hand, the decision to establish a poorhouse may not have been due to a specific economic profile of the town, but rather local circumstances that can be seen to reflect an

⁵⁸ Duxbury Town Records, vol. 2, 1761-1822, May 8, 1795, Duxbury Town Hall, Duxbury, Massachusetts.

⁵⁹ Katherine M. Doherty, *History Highlights: Bridgewater, Massachusetts* (Bridgewater, Massachusetts: The Bridgewater Bicentennial Commission, 1976), 35.

aberration rather than a general pattern. For example, an influential selectmen in either town may have urged the establishment of a poor house, or a readily available house proved to be too tempting, and such conditions did not arise in other towns during this period. As previously mentioned, the town of Bridgewater bought the house of one of its overseers of the poor. In this context, it is interesting to consider why the town of Plymouth did not implement a workhouse before the nineteenth century. It is conceivable that Plymouth officials housed paupers in the poorhouses of one of the neighboring towns, as permitted by the 1774 statute. Indeed, Plymouth did share a border with Duxbury, potentially facilitating a reciprocal agreement. Unfortunately, there is no definitive information from the town records to back up this supposition, but it is not inconceivable that such an arrangement could have occurred between these towns. While the registers for the workhouses are not available, and therefore it cannot be decisively proven that such was the case, such a rationale could be one indication why Plymouth elected not to build a poorhouse.

Increasingly popular in the latter half of the eighteenth century, pauper auctions were designed to farm out the poor of individual towns to the lowest bidder.⁶⁰ Although individuals bidding for indigent persons were obligated to board and clothe them; they were permitted to put them to work to supplement the town's stipend. Moreover, since destitute persons were allotted to the lowest bidder, it was perhaps only logical that they would work in order to reimburse their new guardians. Such a plan ultimately reduced poor persons to the status of marketable commodities. However, there is no evidence from the Plymouth County town records that local towns participated in such activity. Indeed, towns often rejected this major form of poor relief. At a town meeting in 1790, Bridgewater selectmen voted "in the negative to the question of whether or not the town would farm out the poor of said town to the lowest bidder."⁶¹ Although the selectmen did not specify why they chose not to implement the poor auction, some inferences may be suggested. In 1790, the town had a functioning poorhouse, and may have considered the poorhouse a sufficient method of dealing with the poor in the town.

⁶⁰ Cray, 95.

⁶¹ Bridgewater Town Records, vol. 4, 1785-1808, March 15, 1790, Bridgewater Town Hall, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

In conclusion, the fact that only two out of eight towns surveyed in Plymouth County, Massachusetts had poorhouses does not lend much credence to the argument by some historians that poorhouses existed on a wide scale in many colonies in the late eighteenth century. Robert Cray's belief that officials in rural areas were willing to experiment with changing welfare practices, and did not lag far behind colonial cities in implementing workhouses for the poor, is not supported by evidence from these Massachusetts towns. Although the 1744 provincial law ordered all towns to establish poorhouses, the first to obey in Plymouth County, Duxbury, did so almost twenty-five years after the law had been passed, and more than a hundred years after the establishment of the first poorhouse in Boston. Only a few other towns in Massachusetts (including Newburyport in Essex County), employed poorhouses during this period. The evidence from Massachusetts suggests that outside of Salem and Boston, institutionalizing the poor was not the most frequent or dominant policy adopted in New England before 1820. Few towns built poorhouses before the eighteenth century, and those which were funded were much smaller in scale than their urban counterparts. Rural poorhouses were often only temporary, coexisting with traditional forms of out relief and rarely achieved permanent or continuous usage. While by the 1820's many towns had turned to poor farms and large-scale almshouses signifying a clear shift toward institutionalization, this pattern failed to take hold in the eighteenth century. The evidence suggests that an ideology supporting institutionalization had not yet reached a social ascendancy.

The evolution of poor relief practices in Massachusetts followed a complex course of development during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The institutionalization process proceeded sporadically. As evidence by Duxbury and Bridgewater, it was not unusual for a town to construct a poorhouse, abandon it, and adopt a separate structure at a future point. Rural towns often maintained outdoor relief even while increasingly building almshouses to maintain the poor. As rising financial costs created an environment where public institutionalization appeared to be a more feasible economic remedy, both urban and rural communities began to implement more and more indoor relief. While colonial society had attempted to balance poor relief with compassion and discipline, the increase of poor houses in the nineteenth century institutionalized greater impersonality and even hostility toward the indigent.

While the historiography of the transition of poor relief practices between the colonial period and the nineteenth century is often contradictory, depending on the scholar and the geographic area being studied, some consensus can be reached. Although David Rothman views the rise of rural almshouses as a phenomenon of the last nineteenth century, recent scholars including Robert Cray and Douglas Lamar Jones argue that smaller almshouses were more common much earlier in the eighteenth century than had been demonstrated in previous scholarly works. While Cray found rural workhouses to be more widespread in New York, they were not as extensive in Massachusetts. The existence of some rural poorhouses in Massachusetts, however, does seem to indicate that some common approaches to poor relief policy existed between New York and Massachusetts during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Although much of this paper, due to the fragmentary evidence, is speculative, the essential characteristics of the poor relief system were established. The colonial record indicates that communities cared for the poor with minimal disruption to the lives of town residents, often boarding indigents with family members or close neighbors. While only a few colonial towns maintained an almshouse in the eighteenth century, institutionalization became a more generally common form of public assistance throughout the nineteenth century.

Finally, a note should be mentioned about primary sources in regards to colonial policies concerning poor relief practices. As evidenced by the material included in this paper, much of the analyses concerning the poorhouses in rural towns are sparse in comparison to Boston's, which might be considered a methodological difficulty. The records concerning poor relief in local towns were often sparse and fragmentary. Although, the records show that poorhouses existed, what they looked like, how they were set up, or even how many actually entered the poorhouses is not adequately documented. Town records provide a window to view how New England communities functioned and changed over time. Yet, for the historian, the nature of local records leaves many questions unanswered. Although some parts of the town record that are incomplete can be reasonably inferred, such as what poorhouses might have been like, other aspects of town life are difficult to garner from public records. Questions concerning who the poor were and what their daily experiences were like in rural communities are essential in providing a larger context for these communities and how they functioned. By recovering stories of the poor and presumably

disenfranchised individuals, such as Mary Cole and Jane Delanoe, it is easier for the historian to formulate a more realistic image of colonial New England life that is portrayed within local records.

Despite the limited use of the almshouse, however, the almshouse experience, both for the poor and for the townspeople affected by the construction of the building remained a palpable part of community life. One anonymous writer in Duxbury reflected his or her view of the almshouse in these words:

Good Old Almshouse
Shelter from the storm
Keeping warm its inmates old
Infirm, ragged, poor;
Never closed was its door
Ever a comfort from the cold
Keeping every selectmen warm
Good Old Almshouse.⁶²

The poem from the Duxbury almshouse, while stressing the importance of the institution itself, as well as its usefulness in its providing shelter and necessities for the poor and infirm, also emphasizes the importance of the selectmen in implementing such a method of poor relief. The idea that the almshouse “keeps every selectmen” warm is central to the transition of poor relief from the colonial era to the nineteenth century. While the poor were continually helped throughout the transitional period, the poem demonstrates that town officials, including the overseers of the poor and the selectmen, held the ultimate authority over the poor in rural communities. The creation of an almshouse or a poorhouse was not necessarily due to any particular function of the town, but may have been influenced by a particularly powerful selectmen. Thus, while the almshouse served the poor, it also served as a powerful vehicle of town life and political ambition. In the end, the story of the poor and poor relief in colonial America, as many historians indicate, is but one part of the unfolding narrative concerning the experiences of the poor in the United States.

⁶² Duxbury Vertical File, Poorhouse file, Duxbury Town Hall, Duxbury, Massachusetts.

