

Eric G. Nellis, "The Working Poor of Pre-Revolutionary Boston" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 17, No 2 (Summer 1989).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

masshistoryjournal@wsc.ma.edu

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.wsc.ma.edu/mhj>.



The Working Poor of Pre-Revolutionary Boston

Eric G. Nellis

Although before the American Revolution Massachusetts was predominantly rural, the role of Boston, with less than ten percent of the provincial population, has been seen as crucial to any understanding of the popular and radical elements in the social composition of that time and place. The role of the Boston artisan classes in the pre-Revolutionary era and in Revolutionary history has been increasingly well-documented and presented.¹ Similarly, the place of the rural husbandman in the history of this period has been effectively illustrated.² But while historians have examined the condition and behavior of Boston artisans and rural farmers, a small minority of unskilled workers in pre-Revolutionary Boston has gone largely unnoticed.

In rural Massachusetts, in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, subsistence farming served as a foundation for the personal economy of most rural unskilled laborers. The fluid nature of the rural non-agricultural economy provided the laborer

1. Important works on this subject include Dirk Hoerder, Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765-1780 (New York, 1977); Pauline Maier, From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776 (New York, 1973); Gary Nash, The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness and the Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, 1979). A useful overview is Jesse Lemisch, "The American Revolution Seen From the Bottom Up," in Barton Bernstein, editor, Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History (New York, 1967), pp. 3-45. According to Alfred F. Young, the "ordinary" or "lower class" worker of this era is represented by a journeyman shoemaker, "George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742-1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution," William and Mary Quarterly (1981) 38: 561-623.
2. See for example Fred Anderson, A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984); Robert Gross, The Minutemen and Their World (New York, 1976). See also Eric Nellis, "Work and Social Stability in Pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts," Canadian Historical Society Historical Papers (1981), pp. 81-100.

with a further, predictable labor outlet and means of income. In rural Massachusetts the presence of significant numbers of laborers was necessary to the labor-exchange method of farming. Laborers were assured acceptable levels of economic security and social status in the community because the rural "unskilled worker" -- the husbandman and the farm laborer -- was vital to the local economy and constituted the largest single segment of the rural population.³ What is especially striking is the contrast between the status, role, and numbers of unskilled workers in the agricultural towns and the unskilled laborer in Boston.

The Boston economy had no single or dominant activity that defined its labor force. Rather, the economy was a series of sectors that included some manufacturing, construction, merchant and crafts retailing, shipping, and services. The small and mostly personalized businesses in any of those sectors did not need significant numbers of manual laborers.⁴ Nevertheless, a resident population of laborers in Boston had adapted itself to the specific requirements of the town's economy. These laborers were employed in the town's few "heavier" enterprises. They worked

-
3. "Muster Rolls for the Crown Point Expedition, 1756," in Massachusetts State Archives, 94: 167-557. The muster rolls contain the names and occupations of 2,544 men. Among the skilled occupations (over half of the total), over eighty percent were in woodwork, metalwork, and leather trades. From a sample of 193 names on the 1756 muster rolls for rural Plymouth County, the following pattern emerged:

<u>Occupation Given</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
Laborer-husbandman	95	49.2
Wood crafts	23	11.9
Leather crafts	22	11.4
Metal crafts	21	10.9
Cloth Crafts	15	7.8
Others	17	8.8

4. In a sample of over 200 provincial work contracts, in construction, manufacturing, and transportation, taken from Massachusetts Historical Society Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts (hereafter cited as MHS Misc. Bd. Mss.) and Massachusetts Archives, vols. 59, 244, and 245, only one example could be found of a project that employed over ten laborers for more than a few days. Details are in Boston Town Papers, 4: 200ff., in Boston Public Library. The work in question was a combined private/public contract for retaining walls between the town pond and several adjacent mills.

on the docks and wharves as handlers of goods and raw materials in transit and storage, and in the yards and warehouses of the leather trades, slaughter houses, and construction material suppliers. Some were employed as full-time or part-time helpers to the busier tradesmen in the construction or manufacturing sector. But here, as everywhere in the Boston economy, the demand for laborers was erratic and limited. There was no single employer who demanded large numbers of unskilled workers. Boston's independent craftsmen and artisans did most of their own preparatory, ancillary, and manual work. Even the movement of goods through Boston's waterfront facilities, where manual labor might be thought to be in demand, was usually handled in a multitude of small transactions by the individual warehousemen, receivers, or shippers. It is clear that not only did laborers *not* constitute a large segment of the Boston work force, but they were marginal to the town's economy. That economy demanded specialized, full-time single occupations that inhibited cross-vocational mobility. The opportunities for steady and regular employment for laborers in Boston were thus diminished by the town's lack of a single industrial base and by the full-time specialized resourcefulness of its many artisans.⁵

Available data for Boston indicates that of a white adult male working population of nearly three thousand in 1750, fewer than one-fifth were unskilled. Over half the workers of Boston were skilled artisans and crafts retailers, and approximately one-fifth were merchants, large and small, service workers such as barbers and innkeepers, professionals, and full-time government officials. A further five percent were retired, unemployed, and sick or lame. Fewer than five percent of Boston's adult white population were in short-term servitude.⁶ The remaining twenty percent were unskilled, but that figure shrinks when non-artisan but semi-skilled specialties are deducted: ferrymen, boatmen, porters, shoremen (dock workers), and chimney sweeps were usually unapprenticed and did not require craft credentials, but these workers were occupied full-time in their respective semi- or partly-skilled jobs, and they were not laborers in any real

5. Reports of the Records Commissioners of the City of Boston (39 volumes, Boston, 1876-1909), 17: 161-162.

6. *Ibid.*, 14: 220-222, 238-241, 280-282.

contemporary sense.⁷ A laborer in provincial Boston was a day laborer, one who possessed no single source of protracted unskilled employment. These were the totally unskilled workers of the town, having no trade and no fixed marketable service skill. What marginal, sporadic, and day-to-day need there was in Boston for unskilled labor was filled by the laboring servants and the slaves of merchants and the more prosperous artisans and trades entrepreneurs, as well as by free blacks and those white seamen who were between voyages or who had terminated their contracts. The only identifiable dependent unskilled labor population in provincial Boston was made up largely of free blacks and landed seamen.⁸

During the period from 1690 to the American Revolution, as many as 1,500 and as few as 400 free and bonded blacks, males and females, adults and children, lived in Boston. Throughout the period roughly two-thirds of the blacks were males, and two-thirds of those were adults. Of the total number of blacks in Boston, free blacks comprised as little as thirty percent in 1690, and as much as sixty percent in 1760. The black population rose, along with the general population increase, from some 400 in 1690 to over 1,500 in the early 1750s, and it declined thereafter to about 850 in 1765. The percentage of free blacks increased throughout the period. The largest number of free male adult blacks in Boston in the eighteenth century probably was 300. This number diminished steadily as free blacks left Boston for other parts of the province and elsewhere in New England.⁹ These figures and trends indicate that as the ratio of free blacks to slaves rose, the total number of black residents in the town decreased. Almost all blacks were unskilled. The migration of free blacks

7. Lemuel Shattuck, Report of the Census of 1845 (Boston, 1846), pp. 2-132; Mass. Archives, vol. 94, "Muster Rolls"; Reports of the Records Commissioners, vols. 7-20 "Licenses," "poor," "Almshouse." The 1790 U. S. Census, excerpted in Reports of the Records Commissioners, 10: 171ff. lists only 157 "laborers" out of a total working population of 2,585.

8. Boston Town Papers, vols. 1-7, "Contracts."

9. Boston census, in Reports of the Records Commissioners, 15: 369; MHS Misc. Bd. Mss., "Census of Negro Slaves in the Province," 1754; Edgar J. McManus, Black Bondage in the North (Syracuse, N.Y., 1973), pp. 36-107, 199; and Shattuck, Census, p. 132.

from Boston, to the sea or to other regions, suggests a lack of demand for their unskilled labor in Boston. Certainly the out-migration cannot be explained simply in terms of local social, economic, and vocational discrimination against free blacks; similar or even greater prejudices existed everywhere in provincial New England and throughout the other English colonies in North America. Clearly, many free blacks left Boston to find work as unskilled laborers, and not to seek more legal or social freedom.¹⁰

The common seamen who manned Boston's trading fleet likewise formed a measurable plurality of unskilled workers. In the period between 1720 and 1750, some 600 sailors were employed on Boston-based vessels at any given time, and as many as 200 of these men would be ashore, between sailings, for up to several months at a time.¹¹ Moreover, there was a regular turnover among mariners, as men took to the sea for limited periods ranging from one voyage to several years' service, and then they returned to permanent residence and work ashore. In short, there was a constant presence of sailors in Boston who were between contracts or who were entering or leaving the service. The numbers who chose to reside in Boston during their time ashore, however, was negligible. Of the several hundred men regularly employed on Boston ships, at least half came from rural Massachusetts. They were usually landless and unskilled sons of husbandmen, young men who had selected the sea as a way of experiencing the world, or as a means of livelihood and to save for future economic independence. Between sailings or at the termination of contracts, these men returned to their rural homes. It was not unusual to find a few "mariners" and "seamen" listed among the inhabitants of agricultural towns in interior Massachusetts.¹² Thus, fewer than half of the port's sailors chose

10. McManus, Black Bondage, pp. 36-107; Reports of the Records Commissioners, vols. 11-17, "Negroes" in index. The town of Boston encouraged blacks to depart for other colonies; see Reports of the Records Commissioners, 17: 88. On blacks going to sea on Boston- and Massachusetts-based ships, see Lorenzo Greene, The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1775 (New York, 1945).

11. "V. S. Clark Notes," box 1, in Baker Library, Harvard University; Mass. Archives, vols. 60-65, "Maritime."

12. Mass. Archives, vol. 94, "Muster Rolls"; Elmo Hohman, History of American Merchant Seamen (New York, 1956).

to live in Boston when ashore, temporarily or permanently. In the end, the chief source of Boston's laboring class was floating and transient groups of blacks and sailors, the surplus of which was scattered elsewhere in the Massachusetts and New England economy. There, unskilled labor might find more work and opportunity than was available in Boston.

If Boston's commercial economy offered no major employer to attract and hold a large body of unskilled workers, nevertheless there was one area of public employment that provided income for the free blacks, ex-mariners, and other unskilled workers who remained in town. The civic government of Boston itself was a major employer of men in the provincial period.¹³ To put this into perspective, Boston was more heavily populated than six of the province's eleven counties, and as many people lived in Boston as in the rest of Suffolk County, in which the town was situated. The public works and installations that elsewhere would be spread over several hundred square miles of an agricultural county were concentrated in Boston within a few thousand acres.¹⁴ The public works of Boston consumed a considerable outlay of finances and labor. The annual town budget for public works and services was larger than the annual budgets of most of the town's individual commercial and industrial enterprises.¹⁵ As a contractor, the local government was the largest *single* source of work and service for the town's artisans, entrepreneurs, and material provisioners, and it was by far the single most important employer of men, directly and indirectly. That is not to say that the town of Boston represented a distinct economic and occupational alternative to the town's primary and major private enterprises. Certainly the combined value of either all the shipbuilding, distilling, or private construction, for example, far outweighed that of the public works economy. But as a single concentration of funds and labor needs,

 13. Boston Town Papers, vols. 1-7; Reports of the Records Commissioners, vols. 11-20. The former reference concerns public works entirely; the latter shows the mechanisms and official management of public works.

14. W. M. Whitehall, Boston: A Topographical History (Cambridge, 1968), chapter 1; "Price's Boston Maps, 1739 and 1769," in Mass. Historical Society.

15. Compare the town budget of 1745, found in Boston Town Papers, 4: 208B, with the town's two largest shipyards in 1747, in "Hallowell Report," Mass. Archives, 117: 60-68.

the town was a very influential economic factor, and it was the largest single employer of unskilled labor.¹⁶

Apart from the operation of its political and administrative authority, the government of Boston, that is the Town Meeting, built, owned, managed, and maintained an extensive number of buildings and public facilities, and conducted a variety of public works. A partial list of the responsibilities of the town meeting would include the almshouse, workhouse, Town House (meetinghouse), several official residences, the public market, granary, public wharf, prison, four or five public schools, several fire engines and barns, two separate gun batteries, various and extensive wall and turret fortifications, several bridges, two graveyards, more than forty streets of differing widths and lengths, and over sixty smaller lanes and alleys.¹⁷ Although they were the responsibilities of senior government, imperial and provincial properties were partly administered by local authorities and were built and maintained by Boston interests. These included official residences, courts and customs houses, the large Castle William military establishment with its 120 guns and the provincial lighthouse (both in Boston harbor), and the Province House. Most of these were substantial properties and were erected and maintained by contractors and artisans who were otherwise engaged in the town's private construction economy.¹⁸ The real value of these installations to the workers of Boston was in improvements and repairs, additions, and replacements. Each year, scores of contracts were issued to individuals for limited work, to contractors who organized several trades for more ambitious or elaborate work, and occasionally to partnerships of artisan/contractors for large projects such as the eight-month construction of retaining walls near the dam on the town's

16. That fact was stressed a great deal in the town's regular petitions to the General Court for tax relief. As a constant employer of otherwise unemployable men, the town sought a subsidy for its public works. See Reports of the Records Commissioners, esp. 14: 238-240.

17. Shattuck, Census, pp. 64-65; "Price Maps;" Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History; Reports of the Records Commissioners, vols. 11-20, passim.

18. "Military," in Mass. Archives, 70: 564-565, 597, 600, 637, 647.

outskirts or the year-long contract for abutments and supports for the town's largest bridge.¹⁹

Construction and the regular repair and maintenance of public works kept many artisans fully employed, often for periods of months and even years. Furthermore, the provision of services and commodities to public institutions was a minor boon to many retailers, merchants, and some craftsmen who came to be in the indirect employ of the town. In fact, the town's material and labor needs became so reliable and lucrative that a number of artisans and businessmen came to depend upon them as a principal or sole source of income. Construction was linked to growth, of course, and when Boston's population and economy stabilized after 1740, structural maintenance and repair became the most common public works. This diminished the scope and value of individual work contracts. Residual smaller tasks appealed to, and attracted, individual artisans, and the distribution of public contracts, by bid and sometimes by direct appointment, was widespread. In some years over one hundred individuals debited their town accounts for labor, service, or material charges.²⁰ Large-scale contracting continued with occasional new large construction projects or more frequent major repairs and rehabilitations. But the most necessary and regular item of Boston's public works was street and wharf improvement, enlargement, and maintenance. It was there that Boston's largest public works contractors thrived, and where the town's unskilled laborers were most consistently needed and employed.²¹

Street paving contracts were taken usually by bricklayers (bricks being the only contemporary paving material). A major project, lasting from three to six months, employed about twenty full-time laborers. The contractor in these public works was responsible for materials and wages, and he billed the town for gross, but itemized, charges that included those expenditures as well as his own personal expenses. These latter amounts were measured in costs for "my work," "my time," or "my oversight"

19. *Boston Town Papers*, 2: 40, 3:48, and 5:120.

20. *Ibid.*, vols. 2-5, indexes.

21. *Ibid.*, 2: 40, 108, 128, 178, 222-233 are examples of the ten major street contracts issued by the town in a normal year.

(supervision and organization). The contractors hired laborers directly or through any sub-contractors who might be involved. Always, the contractor, if he normally employed a white servant, a free or bound black, or a part-time laborer/helper, would include that man in the work and add his wages separately on the invoices he presented to the town. Street work also employed masons, some carpenters and blacksmiths (for posts, boardwalks, and metal street inlays), and a great many carters. For carters, a less profitable trade than most others, as well as for laborers, street work provided a steady means of subsistence. The absence of even rudimentary mechanical equipment for building, paving, widening, lengthening, and maintaining even unpaved streets and lanes meant that gangs of men constantly were at work in the thoroughfares of Boston in all but the most severe winter months; and then, in periods of thaw, laborers would be out to continue a project or complete an unfinished contract.²²

It was in such work gangs that Boston's resident free blacks and otherwise idle seamen found regular employment. Others found work there too: the artisan's casual helper, the idle shoreman or porter, and many others who sought employment in the Boston unskilled labor market, could fill in the year's working days in street work. Manufacturing and shipbuilding did not require any significant number of unskilled workers, except irregularly and indirectly, and most residential, commercial, and public building construction utilized only a few of the town's free unskilled workers. The erection or major repair of dams, bridges, and fortifications was too infrequent to be a dependable source of livelihood for laborers. But work on Boston's streets and wharves (which were included as streets in public contracts) was a predictable means of income for the unskilled. Upwards of one hundred Boston laborers were employed in this activity in any year, and a sizeable number derived all or a majority of their income from it. But that is not a substantial number of laborers, and if Boston did have a constant population of unskilled workers, it was small and it was comprised mostly of part-time or erstwhile sailors and of free blacks; if the local economy provided a single

22. Ibid.

mode of employment for these workers, it was in public works and chiefly in street, highway, and alley work.²³

The reasons for men attaining adulthood in Boston without learning a recognized, formal, and useful trade were the result of individual character, personality, or more often, the family's economic circumstances during the male's adolescence. To be unskilled in Boston was to be handicapped or even prevented from reaching the society's minimum standards of income and property. The unskilled worker married later than the skilled worker, if at all, supported fewer children, and lived a far less commodious life than did the ordinary artisan.²⁴ He had less opportunity to accumulate savings, credit, or property for his old age, his family's comfort, or his children's inheritance. It was not the strain of monotony or the extreme physical demands of unskilled labor that made his position unattractive and personally unfulfilling -- all working men in provincial society encountered drudgery and manual work, whether they were farmers, artisans, or small merchants. Rather it was the restrictions placed on his income and personal financial self-reliance, as well as the limited choices for advancement, that made unskilled laboring an untenable and difficult vocation. To some extent his dietary and clothing needs could be assured by masters and term employers, and, during unemployment, by charity. But in any event his wage rates remained approximately half that of the artisan. These daily wage rates periodically were set by the General Court, and there were fines and punishment for violations. In the case of artisans, some rates were set by a process of petition and negotiation between the General Court and "corporations" of specific Boston

23. Some street and highway work gangs were comprised entirely or mainly of blacks. For example, see *Boston Town Papers*, 2: 233; Reports of the Records Commissioners, 20: 218.

24. Stephen Erlanger, "The Colonial Worker in Boston, 1775," in U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1976. For the yet unresolved debate on rising or decreasing poverty among provincial Boston workers, and on living conditions generally, see J. A. Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," William and Mary Quarterly (1965) 22: 75-92; and G. B. Warden, "The Distribution of Property in Boston, 1692-1775," Perspectives in American History (1976) 10: 81-128. Henretta argues for more poverty and diminished expectations by using tax assessment data as a gauge; using property transaction data, Warden claims that the material lives of all workers was improving during the provincial period.

trades. But most skilled work was set at equal rates for all crafts. For example, the daily rate for blacksmith's work in 1730 was four shillings; it was the same for carpenters, masons, tanners, shoemakers, and other artisans. The daily rates for "laborers," a legal classification meaning unapprenticed or unlicensed (as a "porter" or "carter," for example) were set arbitrarily by the General Court. These rates were set at between one-half and two-thirds of the average rate for artisans; there was another rate for laborers set at one-third the artisan's pay, if the laborer's food and clothing were provided, or "found," during his employment. It is of some significance that artisans and semi-skilled service workers could circumvent "wage rates" by negotiating with clients or employers on a piece-work, sub-contracting, or finished commodity basis, where variables such as time, materials, and distance (for carters, for example) could be manipulated. Unlike the others, the "laborer" in Boston was usually employed and paid by the day. In that case, the laborer's means to enlarge his income by contracting, and thus increase his control over his work and his future by energy and dexterity, were virtually non-existent.

When fully employed, the wage income of an unskilled day laborer would barely meet the annual basic food, clothing, and housing expenses for a man, his wife, and two young children, even when the wife produced extra income by spinning, sewing, or laundering. Food alone, for four people, consumed over half of a day laborer's combined household income. And the upshot of the laborer's plight, in that regard, was that he could not possibly afford any meager luxuries or added comforts, or even good quality furniture or household fixtures. Nor could he educate his children or arrange for vocational training for them. Moreover, any illness, unexpected expenses, or prolonged curtailment of income was tantamount to charity-supported poverty. During the best of times it was a precarious condition, in which the Boston laborer could not hope to elevate his economic and social position. Unlike the position of the rural laborer, it was not a life that was acceptably stable and it was not a condition that was routinely endured by all Boston laborers. The Boston economy did not encourage or produce an abundance of unskilled laborers, and for that important minority which formed the town's laboring population at any time, there was clearly no incentive to remain in

that status.²⁵ The nature of the Boston economy, in the end, meant that unskilled laborers were forced to seek employment elsewhere and that meant that there was no persistent lower-class stratum in pre-Revolutionary Boston.

Apart from the employment offered by public works, which at best afforded a measure of subsistence, the unskilled worker had to seek support and security in the interstices of the town's private economy. There was always a need for some unskilled labor, of course, but it was irregular and tenuous -- a day here, and a few days there -- and the threat of inadequate income was constant. At times there were genuine shortages of unskilled laborers in Boston, but these were not fixed by any single industry, function, location, or season. A laborer might have a few days work sawing wood for a carpenter, or unloading a ship, or packing hides at dockside, or any number of short-term assignments, and repeat the cycle throughout the year without missing a day's work. But he found very little permanent and guaranteed employment of a kind that would allow him to plan his life against a guaranteed future income, or to obtain limited credit for immediate material improvement.²⁶ Thus, when penury or the lack of a settled vocational place in the community became insupportable, the average laborer attempted to find a more suitable long-term solution to his vocational insecurity. Many followed the rural example of voluntary limited-term servitude, or adult apprenticeship. But the former required acute desperation or the pressure of an unpayable debt, and the latter was normally contingent on unusually good timing.²⁷

Many dissatisfied laborers became seamen for temporary or permanent relief, and perpetuated the rotation of maritime transience and residential unskilled labor. After 1750, Boston's erratic economy created a series of recessions which in turn

25. *Ibid.*; see also Warden, "Inequality and Instability in Eighteenth Century Boston: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1976), 6: 585-620. On wage rates see "Wages in the Colonial Period" (U. S. Bulletin 499, 1929).

26. Carl Bridenbaugh, "The High Cost of Living in Boston, 1728," *New England Quarterly* (1932), 5: 800-811; Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, N.J., 1965), pp. 68-163.

27. Boston Town Papers, 4: 139-144, gives examples of these practices. For voluntary indenturing to retire small debts, see MHS Misc. Bd. Mss. (1737, 1738, 1759).

reduced employment or aggravated the instability of the unskilled. Then, those who could left for other coastal or agricultural towns, although in both instances there was always the difficulty of obtaining resident status. For the majority who remained in Boston and survived the recession, some managed to gain access to some lower-skilled trades, as full-time porters, shoremen, or leather handlers, for example. There, at least, because of traditional trade organization and protectionism, -- porters, for example, helped the Town Meeting regulate their numbers and set their rates -- permanent and more lucrative work could be secured and a measure of financial independence could be enjoyed. In some cases, medium-term servitude of from one to three years led to training in specialized non-artisan auxiliary occupations. If a master or contracted-term employer were a shoemaker, for example, the contracted laborer might learn leather-cutting or heel-making; tanners' laborers learned leather-stretching, and blacksmiths' helpers assisted in rough-forging and bellows operation. Laborers who were contracted to masons were taught lath-making and plaster-mixing and other related tasks and basic trade skills. The laborer of a licensed small boatmaker or wagon maker was instructed and permitted to attach or assemble some parts, always under supervision. Any of these and similar types of employment, while offering current stability for the laborer, also presented future apprenticeship prospects.²⁸

There were other methods of escaping the status of day laborer for the unskilled workers in Boston. As well as providing employment in contracted public works, the town of Boston directly employed many men in full-time administrative and official service capacities. The town required many and assorted public services and had the budget and authority to grant exclusive licenses to individuals in civic employment. Although technically the recipients of those licenses were paid by the users of the services they provided, and not by the town itself, monopoly rights of practice "by the grace of the Town" and on its

28. Boston Town Papers, on porters and shoremen, 3: 229 and 4: 140; Reports of the Records Commissioners, vols. 12-13; on artisan's helpers, see "John Marshall Diary," in MHS Mss.; and "James Russell Receipts," and "Pearson Accounts," in Baker Library Mss. On the fate of many of Boston's working poor, see Douglas Lamar Jones, "The Strolling Poor: Transiency in Eighteenth Century Massachusetts," Journal of Social History (1975), pp. 28-54.

behalf, marked these occupations as civic employments. Naturally, some of these service occupations were not available to unskilled laborers -- schoolteachers, jailers, and alms-masters were obvious exceptions. But laborers could and did obtain permanent and renewable posts as scavengers, who were paid directly from the town budget, as gravediggers, public porters, and public grain handlers.²⁹ The town issued licenses to tavern-keepers, and usually reserved those favors for widows, handicapped men, and aged laborers. Other permits were given to ferrymen, messengers, and livery keepers, all of whom would be otherwise unskilled and who were often funded, for stock, facilities, and bonding, by local merchants, who also used their influence in recommending many laborers for civic licenses.³⁰

Dozens of paid civic administration appointments were made by the selectmen and various town meeting assemblies and committees. It took about one hundred men to administer and operate the town's civil and public affairs, and most appointments and elections were made annually. The respective responsibilities, authority, importance, and pay of these posts were matched by the personal qualifications and social status of the office-holders. Some positions were completely full-time endeavors and others involved only periodic attention. But very few unskilled workers were engaged in civic administration. Among those positions filled by the town's business, merchant, professional, and artisan/entrepreneur class, were the elected selectmen, of course, and the town clerk, several tax assessors and collectors, the keeper of the public granary, the master of the public wharf, the eight overseers of the poor, and the constables. From the town's artisans and smaller merchants were drawn the leather, lumber,

29. Volumes 3 and 4 of Boston Town Papers contain many examples of full-time public employment, including exhaustive detail of gravedigging (3: 56) and scavengers (4: 280). On porters, scavengers, gravediggers, messengers, and public carters, see Reports of the Records Commissioners, vols. 7-20, indexes.

30. Much of this funding and help was given in the hope of reducing the poor tax. On public licenses for private enterprise, see Reports of the Records Commissioners, vols. 11-17, especially, under "licenses," "taverners," "truckers," "innholders," etc. On petitions by widows, handicapped, and the aged see Boston Town Papers, 4: 280-286. In some years over seventy-five of these licenses were issued, renewed, cancelled, or exchanged. See Boston Town Papers, 2: 97. On merchant financial support for porters see 4: 140 and 144.

and grain sealers, the heads of the two watches, and the various ward fire engine masters. Only as members of the town watch, which involved nearly twenty posts, or occasionally as part-time members of a fire engine crew, were laborers involved in direct civil administration or service. It is worth noting, in terms of time and income, that whereas the town often had problems in securing a paid appointee -- as assessor or constable for example, many preferring to pay a fine and find a substitute -- there was a constant competition for the few posts open to laborers, either as nominated appointees or as licensees. In many cases, the laborer/applicant was favored by the intercession and backing of a local man of influence. In the acquisition of public licenses it was often the political and financial largesse of a particular merchant that assured the success of a laborer's application. These acts of beneficence were for the most part motivated either by concern for a current or former servant, or by a desire to control the poor tax by convenient employment of a real or potential charity case.³¹ Much has been made of the relative economic status of Boston's working population. But there has been no proof that skilled or artisanal workers were becoming impoverished. If there was a stratum of poor in provincial Boston, it was made up of the town's unskilled workers and certainly not of the artisanal class. Moreover, this stratum of poor was not a destitute class. The majority of the poor in Boston were working poor, those who were living on the margin of subsistence while normally employed as laborers. But its membership was not fixed. Its composition changed regularly as men acquired some reliable and remunerative skills and occupations, or as they and their families left the town. Turnover was frequent and high, and there was little continuity in

31. Robert F. Seybolt, The Town Officials of Colonial Boston, 1620-1775 (Cambridge, 1939) contains the names of all known civic administrators, appointees, and town employees during Boston's pre-Revolutionary history. They were extracted from Reports of the Records Commissioners and Boston Town Papers. For selected years between 1700 and 1760, names were taken from Seybolt's lists and compared with the genealogical, economic, and occupational details found in the "Thwing Catalogue" at the MHS. On application by laborers for civic employment, see Boston Town Papers, 3: 56. On petitions from town watch for pay increases see 3: 64. For substitution in civic appointments, see Seybolt, Town Officials. For merchant support of laborers' applications for licenses and employment, including depositions and bonds, see Boston Town Papers, 4: 132-203.

the families which remained in that condition.³² Moreover, the unskilled worker represented a minority of between ten and twenty percent of the town's working population, and only a fraction of that number were bona fide impoverished day laborers. Still, many laborers and their families must be viewed as working poor, and for some, occasional and sometimes frequent reliance on poor relief was necessary for subsistence. The working poor, despite their restricted economic and social lives, retained some measure of independence and could and did escape to better conditions and opportunity. In this regard, the town's merchant and artisan community did much to alleviate the poverty of some laborers by offering training, permanent work, and promotions. Whether or not this was cynical, to reduce the burden of the poor tax, or consisted of acts of charity and social and moral concern, this method of aid helped reduce the numbers of working poor.³³

The working poor were distinguished, in law and status, from the "idle poor," the impious, intemperate, and socially "dangerous" residents whose unemployment was often but not always deliberate or preferred. Massachusetts law long made provision for control of this latter "vice," by making local authorities responsible for its regulation and eradication. In the smaller communities this control was exercised within the home and throughout the community by direct, personalized enforcement and persuasion, and by direct communal social pressure. But in the larger impersonal setting of Boston, control of idleness was institutionalized outside the home.³⁴

The Almshouse and Workhouse in Boston housed those whose habits or circumstances marked them as "idle poor." The destitute, whether lazy, lame, aged, abandoned youths, or widows, were when possible sequestered in those public institutions and

32. Warden, "Distribution of Property."

33. For collective private efforts to find full-time employment or advanced craft training for the unskilled working poor, see Reports of the Records Commissioners, 8: 147-148 and 154; and 13: 80. See the records of the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor, in "Ezekial Price Papers," in M.H.S.; and especially Eric Nellis, "Misreading the Signs: Industrial Imitation, Poverty and the Social Order in Colonial Boston" New England Quarterly (1986) 59: 486-507.

34. W. H. Whitmore, compiler, Colonial Laws of Massachusetts (Boston, 1889), pp. 26, 103, 123, 126-128; Acts and Resolves, 1: 64-68, and 2: 756-758.

were made to be productive or otherwise kept occupied. In this way, education and re-education of "work habits" were administered. Potentially disruptive, criminal, or anti-social elements, as well as dependents who were helpless or susceptible to idleness, were removed from the streets of the town, and a mild form of punishment, correction, or protection, by non-penal incarceration, was accomplished. Up to 1738 the Almshouse was used as both residential charity relief for the town's genuinely incapacitated and as a site for productive charity where the idle but healthy poor could be put to work. After 1738, the functions were separated, more as a result of increased general population than from a percentage increase of the idle poor. The Almshouse contained from as few as fifty to just over one hundred people, depending on the condition of Boston's economy. The Workhouse usually held thirty to fifty persons engaged in mandatory employment, such as supervised commercial weaving or shoemaking. These figures represented the extremes in the numbers of the town's indigent population. And another ten to twenty persons could be located at any time in the town jail, there as a result of debt or poverty-related crime.³⁵

For Boston's working poor, marginal subsistence meant a precarious social existence; one that was exacerbated by the short-term and irregular work market and by the vagaries of the Boston commercial economy. Boston's economy and population stabilized in the 1735 to 1745 period. Some shipbuilding activity had moved north to the other coastal towns which were nearer to the receding timber resources, and some of Boston's other industries, such as distilling and leather manufacturing, suffered stagnation and in some instances a fall in production. Some small manufacturers removed their shops and capital to other parts of the province or elsewhere in New England, often for tax reasons. Boston's population declined from a peak of nearly 17,000 in 1740 to

35. On the Almshouse, see Reports of the Records Commissioners, 7: 186, 13: 194 and 294-296, 15: 20-21, 75-76, and 292, 7: 86-89, 148, and 232-233, and passim, vols. 11-20. On the Workhouse (built in 1738), see Reports of the Records Commissioners, 15: 27, 30, 38, 66, and 189. On the populations of these institutions, see Reports of the Records Commissioners, 15: 369. On prison figures and reasons for incarcerations, see MHS Misc. Bd. Mss., for 1734, 1740, 1742, 1752.

15,731 in 1752, and it remained at roughly that level until after the American Revolution.³⁶

For the skilled artisan and small merchant, removal from Boston for economic improvement, or in the wake of recession, involved some hardship but was usually opportunist as well. They merely followed the relocation of their industrial associates or moved their marketable skills to other towns where their economic and social values, standards, and status could be continued. But for those unskilled workers who were dependent on the various private and public laboring needs of the town's economy, the migration of a few artisans and merchants and a slight decline in economic activity could be disastrous. As noted, without relatives, backers, or a need for his services, the laborer had difficulty in being "admitted" to another town. The town of Boston itself practiced a strict control of incoming population, and at times virtually forbade the admission of unskilled workers.³⁷ The social consequences of even slight economic lapses were potentially destructive to the unmarried unskilled laborer. If he went to sea he left his family with an insecure income; most sailors contracted for an advance of sea wages, and periodic sums were paid thereafter to the man's dependents by the contracting merchant or ship owner. But the subsequent payments were variable and sometimes irregular, for they were contingent on the amounts and values of cargoes handled during the voyage.

Economic vicissitudes aside, the absence of a father created serious social disruption in the homes of the working poor. Many men went to sea and did not return. Other laborers simply abandoned their families and fled to the west or to other colonies. One of the corollaries of distressed circumstances, among the working as well as the idle poor, was the forced servitude or very early involuntary apprenticeship of their children. This was a regular occurrence with the poor that increased with underemployment. Parents committed their children to terms of

36. G. B. Warden, Boston, 1689-1775 (Boston, 1970), chap. 2; Reports of the Records Commissioners, 14: 238-241 and 280-282; Mass. Archives Mss., 59: 60-68.

37. The authority for residency requirements and for control of migrants was given to the individual towns. See Josiah Benton, Warning Out in New England, 1656-1817 (Boston, 1911). In some years the town of Boston "warned out" an average of nearly forty persons a month. See Boston Town Papers, 7: 73.

apprenticeship and servitude of up to fifteen years, and in the process forfeited parental contact and influence. For orphans, or for children of the destitute, the legal authority and service arrangements were in the hands of local government -- the Overseers of the Poor -- and the initiative lay with those public authorities. But there were enough examples of voluntary commitments by parents to indicate the extent and persistence of this problem for the working poor. It was a practice as old as Boston, and it increased in times of economic uncertainty. Of the male children involved in this process, nearly half managed to be located in local trades and industries. The rest were sent out of Boston to learn any one of sixty trades or occupations, or in the case of over one-third of the total, to farmers, principally as agricultural assistants. Virtually all the young females involved in child servitude went into domestic service. While this practice had the effect of destroying or tampering with normal family life -- sometimes only one in three of the children of the working poor were removed -- in many cases it was the only assurance of any family life for certain children. The median age of these young indentured children was nine, but some were as young as five.³⁸

This system of contractual foster parentage, and the extreme youth of the indentured, derived from the hardships of the unskilled working poor and from the disjointed domestic conditions caused by underemployment, widowhood, or chronic penury, and it must be considered as radically different from the usual apprenticeship practices of the skilled and solvent unskilled workers of the province. In the latter event, the children and youth of more solvent workers were indentured outside the home to learn skills and habits for their own future self-sufficiency, and that only occurred after the child had spent its formative years with its own parents. Usually, children were at home until they were thirteen or fourteen, and their indentures ranged from five to seven years. In the case of Boston's working poor, the reasons for settling children outside the home often resulted from an inability to support those children. Official attitudes encouraged these forms of early and long-term indenture of poor children as a means of reducing the actual or potential cost of public poor relief and of upholding the traditional Puritan precepts of moral, social,

38. Lawrence Towner, "The Indentures of Boston's Poor Apprentices, 1734-1805," *Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Transactions* (1956), 43: 417-468.

familial, and vocational conventions for children who otherwise would be denied those influences.³⁹

Along with the forced or necessary indentures of the town's orphans and the children of the working poor, family dislocation caused other local and economic problems -- the absence of a male in the family home is an example of this. An official tax assessor's census of 1742 determined that the total population of Boston, 16,382, included "1,200 widows, 1,000 whereof are in low circumstances." Contemporary usage included as "widows" all married women who happened to be living alone. The 1,200 women cited in the assessor's report would certainly include a substantial proportion of "grass widows," whose husbands were at sea or had permanently or temporarily abandoned the home. But many were genuinely bereaved widows whose husbands had died at sea or in military actions, or from disease or accidents, or had simply, in old age, preceded their wives.⁴⁰ Of the two hundred women not deemed to be in "low circumstances," it can be assumed that they were the former wives of successful or prudent artisans and merchants, and had been willed adequate estates of property or investment revenues or stock. Some of the troubled one thousand were also possessors of property, but could not subsist without additional income.

The majority of the one thousand "widows" who were considered needy constituted another stratum, and a large one, of both workers and working poor. As such, they served an important function in Boston's textile and clothing economy. Virtually all the linen and woolen fibers used by Boston's commercial weavers came from the spinning wheels of the town's single women -- daughters at home and widows.⁴¹ But full-time spinning could provide only a rough subsistence, and many of these independent women were included at times on the town's

39. *Ibid.*; Acts and Resolves, 1: 64-68, and 2: 756-758 (especially section 7) give ample explanation and justification for the official encouragement of the early indenture of the children of the poor.

40. Reports of the Records Commissioners, 15: 369; Daniel Scott Smith, "The Demographic History of Colonial New England," Journal of Economic History (1972), 32: 165-183. On "lost" seamen, see Boston Town Papers, 4: 135.

41. W. R. Bagnall, The Textile Industries of the United States (Cambridge, 1893), pp. 28-62.

poor-relief roll. Under a deliberate policy of Boston's licensing authority, many tavern, rooming house, and eating shop permits were issued to widows. Many more took servant's work in the homes of the more affluent. But for several hundred women in provincial Boston, full-time spinning and periodic charity were the major sources of their material support. The condition implicit in the term "low circumstances" did not mean that Boston's working "widows" were desperately poor. Rather, it appears that their position as low-income and subsistence inhabitants restricted their opportunities for employment and offered little chance of a fuller, more comfortable, or economically and socially mobile life.⁴²

Certainly not all of Boston's unskilled workers can be counted as working poor. There were opportunities within the Boston economy for the unskilled man to learn a trade in his adult life or to gain permanent employment in a service trade or as a public licensee. Some laborers became quite indispensable, in the manner of the rural handyman, and were talented, versatile, and very useful while remaining independent day laborers and technically "unskilled."⁴³ But very few unskilled workers could attain or preserve a permanent and economically satisfactory place in the community as contract laborers. If they did not escape the status of casual, limited-term laborers by moving vocationally upward, they risked permanent borderline poverty. Furthermore, continuance in a position of subsistence laborer endangered the individual's ability to find a fixed place in the community's social, economic, and even political process. The day laborer had difficulty in starting a family, and if he did, he ran the risk of having it dismembered; moreover, he had no hope of attaining political participation in Boston's civic government. By contrast, the agricultural laborer did find social and economic security in his status, and was assured a permanent domicile in the rural town because invariably he possessed enough arable land to be at least partially self-sufficient. These qualities meant that the rural

42. Ibid; on the issuance of commercial licenses to widows, see Boston Town Papers, 4: 135. There are several dozen good examples of petitions, appeals, and decisions on the licensing of widows in Reports of the Records Commissioners, vols. 7-20, indexes under "widow," "fees," and "licenses."

43. "Cockerel Reeves Account Book, 1708-1729," in Baker Library Mss.

unskilled worker could claim an active and respected place in the community. He was at the center of a relatively stable family unit, which itself was involved in the various social and economic activities of the rural town. In those respects the rural laborer was closer in status to the rural artisan than was the Boston laborer to that of the Boston artisan.⁴⁴

Late colonial Boston's economy was supported by a working population comprised largely of trained independent artisans of a great variety of skills and specialties. These artisans were fitted to the well-defined functions of a commercial, manufacturing, and service entrepôt. The nature of Boston's economic enterprises, and the multiplicity and small size of the units within those enterprises, precluded the need for a large and stable force of unskilled workers. What need Boston did have for unskilled labor, on the edges of the private commercial economies and in public works, was filled to a large extent by a socio-economic class that was impermanent: mostly migrant seamen and freed blacks. It is worth repeating that this class was a creation of Boston's role as a commercial and mercantile port. That same economy denied the establishment of a resident and permanent class of unskilled laborers, and invited its laboring population to be temporary in substance. There were always unskilled workers in Boston. But there was nothing in the town's economy to encourage or permit the persistence of laboring families, either occupationally or residentially, so that if the town's economy did require a measure of unskilled labor, those involved in it were workers who were in

44. On voting qualifications and participation in town meetings, in Boston and in the rural towns, see *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings* (1868), 10: 370-375; Alan Kreider and Kenneth Lockridge, "The Evolution of Massachusetts Town Government, 1640-1740," *William and Mary Quarterly* (1966), 23: 549-574. The town meeting was ostensibly a democratic forum where eligible freeholders "voted" on local issues and ordinances, in conjunction with the elected selectmen. However, relative town size determined the degree of participation in this process, even among eligible residents. For example, as many as 1,500 men in Boston were franchised in the middle of the eighteenth century, but the meetinghouse had a 250 to 300 person capacity. By contrast, one hundred men often attended Braintree's town meetings in the 1700 to 1710 period; at that time Braintree had fewer than three hundred "rateable polls." See "John Marshall Diary," in MHS Mss. This interesting aspect of local politics has not been emphasized enough, but see Kreider and Lockridge, above, and Edward Cook Jr., *The Fathers of the Towns* (New York, 1976), and Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms* (New York, 1970).

the process of acquiring new skills, or who were moving through Boston. Unlike the rural towns of Massachusetts, Boston's wage economy did not accommodate a permanent population of unskilled labor. In Boston then, to be unskilled was to be reduced to a condition best conceptualized as "working poor." Those in that condition were socially and economically depressed, but were not perpetuating themselves as a distinct class.