March Meeting, 1962

A SPECIAL MEETING of the Society was held at its House, No. 87 Mount Vernon Street, Boston, on Thursday, 15 March 1962, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the President, Mr. CLIFFORD KENYON SHIPTON, in the chair.

The records of the Stated Meeting in February were read and approved.

Mr. LAWRENCE W. TOWNER read a paper entitled:

The Indentures of Boston's Poor Apprentices: 1734-1805

EARLY in June 1756 Zachariah Fowle, Boston printer and bookseller, took as apprentice a seven-year-old boy, one of some 1,100 boys and girls bound out by Boston's Overseers of the Poor between 1734 and 1805. In signing the indenture of apprenticeship, Fowle bound himself, his wife, and his heirs to feed, clothe, and shelter the boy until he reached the age of twenty-one years; to teach him to read, write, and cipher; and, having taught him the "Art and Mistry" of a printer, to release him with "two good Suits of Apparrel for all parts of his Body one for the Lords Days the other for working days Suitable to his Degree."

In turn, the apprentice promised to obey Fowle's lawful commands, to keep his secrets, to absent himself only with his master's leave, to avoid fornication and matrimony, to shun taverns and alehouses, and to stay away from cards, dice, and other forms of gaming. He was, in short, to behave as a "good and faithfull Apprentice" ought to behave. The indentures were witnessed by eight Overseers of the Poor and, a month later, assented to by two of his majesty's justices of the peace.

1 There were more indentures, but the rest have disappeared. At present there is only one between 1734 and 1739. Between 21 April 1756, and 1 November 1773, there were 483 children bound out, but only 250 indentures are extant. Thus, there may have been as many as 35 per cent more than the 1,100 apprentices, 1734-1805. But between 1 April 1785, and early January, 1790, the lists and indentures correspond exactly in numbers. Hence, all that can be said for sure is that there were at least 93 more children bound out than there are indentures for the whole period. Compare the indentures abstracted below with the fragmentary lists in "Admissions, 1760-74," Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor, Massachusetts Historical Society. Hereafter cited as Overseers Records.

2 The copy of Thomas's indenture abstracted below carries only the signatures of
was Isaiah Thomas, one of five children of the indigent and possibly widowed Mrs. Thomas. Isaiah's grandfather, Peter Thomas, had been a merchant in Boston and had held such minor civic posts as tithingman, constable, wharfinger, purchaser of grain, and assessor. Isaiah's father, however, had fallen on evil days and had abandoned his family, leaving his wife the responsibility of raising the children. Between the ages of two and six years, Isaiah had been cared for by a family in the country. Now, after a year and a half at home, he was being apprenticed.8

His indenture was saved, along with the others executed by the Overseers of the Poor, in what is the largest collection of indentures for any kind of bound servant in New England. From these indentures can be learned something about the ethnic background of Boston's poor in the eighteenth century, the kinds of trades that were open to poor children, the extent to which Boston supplied a colony- or state-wide labor market, and the kinds of persons who were willing to take poor boys and girls into their farms, homes, and shops. They provide information for the historian of education, of the family, of the poor, and of the bound labor system. They also provide a starting point for the student of specific trades in eighteenth-century Massachusetts as well as rich genealogical material for researchers in family history. They are reproduced in abstract form in the table, below.

Poor apprenticeship was but one of several forms of servitude in early Massachusetts. Although in the early decades of settlement, indentured servants and apprentices had been most typical, after the 1650's other kinds became important. Debtors, criminals, poor apprentices, and slaves were added to the servant categories, so that by the eighteenth century there were more than a half-dozen types. The composition of the servant class changed also. In the early years most servants were born either in England or in America of English parents. With some serious exceptions, they fit in well with the Puritan community, some becoming landowners, church members, and freemen of the colony. Gradually at first, but with increasing swiftness, new religious, social, racial, and national groups were

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Fowles, two overseers, and two justices. Thomas's personal copy, now at the American Antiquarian Society, has the signatures of eight overseers and two justices.

8 See Clifford K. Shipton, Isaiah Thomas, Printer, Patriot, and Philanthropist, 1749-1823 (Rochester, 1948). For Peter Thomas's office, see Robert Francis Seybolt, The Town Officials of Colonial Boston, 1634-1775 (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), 124, 149, 156, 182. Mr. Marcus McCrison, librarian of the American Antiquarian Society, kindly allowed me to consult the typescript of the recently located "Diary" of Isaiah Thomas, soon to be published. Thomas recorded that his grandfather had also been an Overseer of the Poor.
introduced. Irish and Scottish prisoners from the English civil wars came in the 1650’s. Indians and Negroes became servants and slaves—Indians particularly following the Pequot War and King Philip’s War, Negroes particularly after the restoration of the Stuarts and the penetration of the slave trade by the English. By the eighteenth century the servant class was a marvelously polyglot group. Irish in goodly numbers, and Scottish, Jersey, Guernsey, and continental whites were sold as indentured servants. Spanish and New England Indians were bought or hired as slaves and servants and the latter were used frequently in fishing and whaling in what had been Plymouth colony. Negroes from the West Indies and the Guinea Coast were sold regularly and came to be the largest single group of imported bound labor by the 1730’s and 1740’s.4

The growth of this complicated and diverse system of bound labor cannot be explained in terms of custom alone. Most of the types of servitude had been part of the English experience before the Winthrop fleet sailed for America,5 but more than the transplanting of English institutions was involved. The general availability of land, the widespread opportunities for labor, the necessity of importing labor, all made bound labor an apparent necessity if men were to have help in building homes, clearing land, and engaging in crafts and commerce. Moreover, servitude, which was modeled on the family in Massachusetts, provided an effective means of socializing the young, the unregenerate, and the criminal. By means of a contract, which bound the worker to his employer, or, through outright ownership, the slave to his master, both the economic and the social needs of society could be met.6

The relationship between Puritans and their poor is an excellent example of this combination of a customary institution with their immediate economic and social needs as they understood them. The seventeenth-century Puritans had a highly developed social consciousness set within a religious framework. They believed that the welfare of the individual should be subordinated to the religious and secular needs of the community, and in turn, that the community had a responsibility for the individual’s welfare. This sense of moral responsibility led them to a broad

5 Even in the case of slavery, the English were not without recent experience. English ships had dabbled in the slave trade, and Paul Baynes, who died in 1619, spoke familiarly of Blackmoor slaves. See his An Entire Commentary Upon ... Ephesians ... (London, 1643), 694.
6 Towner, “A Good Master,” Ch. I.
definition of poverty, one which went well beyond the mere question of pounds, shillings, and pence. While the truly poor were not considered morally dangerous merely because they were poor, their poverty might be a warning of God’s displeasure at secret evil actions not yet discovered to the community. On the other hand, financially solvent violators of the Commandments were, under the Covenant Theology, already moral liabilities and might well be on the road to becoming economic liabilities as well. Both groups presented an open invitation to God to visit his wrath upon the entire community. The solution to this problem was to make sure, as Professor Edmund S. Morgan has demonstrated, that every individual was subordinated to proper family government.  

Consequently, it was not merely those in need of alms who were subject to having their children taken from them under what might be called legislation for the poor. Parents or masters who failed to raise their children or servants in a properly religious atmosphere, who neglected their instruction in reading, who failed to teach them the catechism, or who were not bringing them up to a secular calling were equally likely to lose their wards to some other master. Single individuals of whatever age were required by law to place themselves under good family government, and even a few married persons—those whose family government had failed—were placed under the jurisdiction of other families. The idle as well as the indigent; the loose liver as well as the lame, the halt, and the blind; the profligate as well as the poor orphan were trapped in the fine-meshed net of legislation for the poor. 

Ruben Guppy of Salem is a good example of how poverty of spirit was considered as dangerous as a thin purse. Guppy was in and out of court on charges at least fourteen times between 1641 and 1674. He got himself severely whipped in 1641 for abandoning his pregnant wife, and for theft, lying, swearing, and blasphemy. Among other things, he had said that the parings of his nails were as acceptable to God as were days of Thanksgiving. In 1644, having already been in court six times, he was fined for not paying his rent and for using a neighbor’s fence for firewood. A year later he was again haled into court for fence stealing. At the same court he accused his wife of “wanton dalliance” with a neighbor. Shortly

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1 Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family* . . . (Boston, 1956), Chs. IV–V.
thereafter the community ordered Guppy’s two oldest children apprenticed. Guppy was subsequently in court in 1649 for defamation of character, in 1651 for more fence stealing, and again in 1657 for accusing a neighbor of burglary. Obviously Guppy fitted well into the Puritan’s definition of a moral liability.9

It was in the late 1660’s, the 1670’s, and 1680’s, however, when the pressure from England exacerbated the growing divisions within Massachusetts and when King Philip’s War threatened the very existence of the colony, that the emphasis on family government as a means of social control reached its climax. In 1668, the Massachusetts government embarked on a vigorous campaign to enforce conformity. Printed instructions were sent to all towns repeating the laws relating to children, servants, and single adults living “dissolute lives” and requiring that their names be reported.1 In Middlesex county alone, seven towns listed twenty-six persons living disorderly lives outside family government and three persons who needed watching.2 In other counties, too, families and single individuals were carefully scrutinized for the next two decades. In 1672, for example, twelve families of Muddy River were warned to put out their children as “servants to serve by Indentures.”3 In 1680, the Hampshire County Court found Cornelius Merry of Northampton to be a “very vicious” person and his care over his little children to be such as he “Rather Learnes them Irrreligion rather than any good Literature....” It ordered the selectmen to apprentice his two children.4 In the same year, Robert Lyman and his wife, also of Northampton, were found incapable of maintaining their family. When they appeared in court, “showing their earnestness that their children should not be put out,” the Court ruled “that what the said Parents Spoke, [was] more out of fond affection and sinful Indulgence than any Reason or Rule.” The two youngest Lyman boys and one of the girls were subsequently apprenticed.5

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9 Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts, ed. George Francis Dow, 8 vols. (Salem, 1911–1942), iv, passim. For the particular instances cited see: 1, 25, 68, 82–83, 154, 209; II, 68. For the order to bind out Guppy’s children see the Essex Institute Historical Collections, ix (1869), 191.


2 File 49 (1668), Files of the Middlesex County Court (Middlesex County Court House, Cambridge, Mass.)

3 Record Commissioners of the Town of Boston, Reports, 39 vols. (Boston, 1881–1909), vii, 67. Hereafter cited as Boston Records.

4 Records of the Hampshire County Court, 1 (1680), 36, Hampshire County Court House, Northampton, Massachusetts.

5 Ibid.
Adults also were subjected to family government following the 1660's. One Abigail Roberts, for example, was presented for dressing in clothing finer than her station in life warranted and for living outside of family government. However, several neighbors appeared in court and testified that she now lived in service and had reformed her dress. A more serious charge, against a widow having a child three years after her husband's death, resulted in her being whipped ten stripes and ordered "into some good Family where shee may be under government." Charges of idleness, drunkenness, "idle reports to amuse the people," playing cards and keeping bad company, stubborn and wicked notions, and the wearing of men's clothes by a girl, thus "seeming to confound the course of nature," all resulted in persons being placed under family jurisdiction. In one case, that of an aged deacon and militia captain named James Johnson, "disorderly carriages" in his family resulted in an order to break up housekeeping and to "dispose of himselfe into some good orderly Family within one Fortnight."

In 1679 the General Court summed up its conception of secular and spiritual poverty in its instructions for the newly created office of tithingman. These officials, to be chosen annually from among the "most prudent and discreet Inhabitants," were "diligently to inspect the manner of all disorderly persons, and whereby more private admonitions they will not be reclaimed, they are . . . to present their names [to the proper authorities] . . . who shall proceed against them as the Law directs, as also they are in like manner to present . . . all single persons that live from under Family Government, stubborn and disorderly Children and Servants, night-walkers, Typlers, Sabbath breakers, by night or by day, and such as absent themselves from the publick Worship of God on the Lords dayes, or whatever else course or practice of any person or persons whatsoever tending to debauchery, Irrreligion, prophaness, and Atheisme amongst us, whether by omission of Family Government, nurture and religious duties and instruction of Children and Servants, or idle, profigate, uncivil or rude practices of any sort. . . ."

\* \* Records of the Suffolk County Court, 1671-1680, Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Publications, xxix-xxx (1933), ii (1676), 751. Hereafter cited as Suffolk County Court.

1 \* \* Ibid., i (1674), 442.

2 \* \* Ibid., i (1672), 184, (1673), 253; ii (1675), 870-871; Records of the Middlesex County Court, iii (1679), 290; case of Mary Henly, 1691/92, ibid., vol. 1689-1699, n.p.

3 Suffolk County Court, ii (1675), 646-647.

4 Mass. Rec., v. 240-241. I have followed the wording of this law as reproduced in
The very intensity of this drive to emphasize family government was a measure of the changes that were taking place in society. Between 1660 and 1720, as Professor Perry Miller has shown, the religiously oriented, homogeneous community was becoming a secular, diverse, and commercial society. As a result, the area of agreement on what was right and wrong was slowly narrowing, and the broad religious and moral concept of poverty was giving way to a definition based primarily on the lack of measurable wealth. At the same time, the society, growing richer and more complex, was turning gradually to institutions of brick and mortar as a means of caring for its criminals, its idle, and its poor. Increasingly, adults ended up at the house of correction, the workhouse, or the almshouse, and by and large, after 1692, only poor children, not poor or wayward adults, were subjected to family authority other than their own.

Eighteenth-century legislation concerning the binding out of poor children, then, was more sharply based on economic considerations than in the seventeenth century, although it still allowed some leeway in defining exactly who were the poor. The basic law came in 1692. By its terms the selectmen or Overseers of the Poor could bind out poor children with the consent of two justices of the peace, the boys to age twenty-one, the girls to age eighteen "or time of marriage." All children, or at least those "not having estates otherwise to maintain themselves," were subject to scrutiny to make sure they were being brought up to honest callings. No definition of poverty was provided, but presumably only those receiving alms were considered as falling within the jurisdiction of the law.

The acts which followed were largely explanatory in nature and sought an effective definition of what constituted poverty. In the Act of 1704 the poor were defined as those who were not rated for town or province taxes. Such persons, whether receiving alms or not, were liable to having


a Criminals, particularly thieves, and a few poor debtors were exceptions. See Towne, "A Good Master," Ch. IV. In 1756 a law was enacted, for three years, allowing the overseers or selectmen of a town to bind out a poor adult for one year, his wages to be used to support his family. In 1759, a law was enacted for five years allowing the mother of a bastard child to be indentured for five years if her charges had been born by the town or if her child became a charge to the town before it was five years of age. Neither law was re-enacted. *Acts and Resolves . . . of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay . . .*, 21 vols. (Boston, 1869–1924), III, 936–938; IV, 178–179. Hereafter cited as *Acts and Resolves*.

*Acts and Resolves*, 1, 67.
their children bound out by the authorities. This act also required that apprentices be taught to read and write, a provision subsequently restricted to males in 1711, the girls to be taught reading only. While being rated for taxes would protect one from losing his children under ordinary circumstances, a law in 1722 made idle, dissolute, or vagrant parents, whether rated for taxes or not, subject to having their children "put out into orderly families."

The climax to this legislation came in 1735 in the form of a special act for Boston, where the numbers of the poor had been increasing alarmingly. Since the 1690's local taxes had been raised regularly "for relieving the poor and other charges"; three private charitable societies now existed; and at least one minister saw the danger of a growing class of idle poor. In 1742, out of a population of 17,756, there were 110 persons in the almshouse and 36 in the workhouse. Of 1,200 widows, 1,000 were not rated for taxes. Under these circumstances, the legislature, by the Act of 1735, allowed Boston to appoint twelve Overseers of the Poor, one for each ward. These men were to supervise the poor, to commit persons to a workhouse, which by the act they were empowered to erect, and to enforce the laws with regard to apprenticing the children of the poor. Unless a parent were rated for personal estate or faculty (i.e. a trade or profession), he was subject to having his children bound out. Furthermore, children who, at the age of six years, did not know the alphabet, were to be bound out "as when parents are indigent and rated nothing to the publick taxes. . . ." This latter provision notwithstanding, there is little or no evidence to indicate that any criterion other than poverty was actually used. Isaiah Thomas and the other poor children bound out between 1734 and 1805 seem to have been truly children of the poor.

The numbers of boys and girls apprenticed under the Act of 1735 and

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8 Ibid., t. 538-539, 654-655; ii. 242. These acts were usually temporary, renewed from time to time, but not always soon enough to avoid lapsing.
9 Boston Records, viii. 738; Carl Bridenbaugh, Cities in the Wilderness. . . . (New York, 1918), 393-394; Clifford K. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates (Cambridge, Mass., 1873-75), vi. 444. Massachusetts Historical Society, Collections, 3rd Ser., i (1823), 158.
10 Act and Resolves, i. 155. Except for a law in 1771, which required that boys be taught reading, writing, and ciphering, no significant change was made in this law during the colonial period. In 1786 and 1794 the state of Massachusetts empowered all towns to appoint overseers of the poor and the overseers to bind out the children of the poor as apprentices or servants. The educational provisions were the same as revised in 1771. Parents who were assessed town or district taxes were not liable to having their children bound. Ibid., v. 161-162; The General Laws of Massachusetts from the Adoption of the Constitution to February, 1822, ed., Theron Metcalf, 2 vols. (Boston, 1823), i. 438-449.
other laws modeled on it varied from year to year. The high year was
1768 with forty-six apprentices, the low, 1776, with but one. The average
number per year was seventeen. The peak decades were between 1760
and 1780 when, for all but five years, more than the average number
of apprentices were bound out. The decades of war and revolution, obviously,
created serious social problems. By contrast, in the decades between 1780
and 1805 there were only three above-average years. The ratio of boys
to girls remained fairly steady at three to two throughout the period. 8

The duration of the contracts varied, of course, with the age and sex
of the individual apprentice. About one-half of the children were bound
out between the ages of five and nine. The median age was nine. Some,
like Edward Holin who was apprenticed in 1745 at the age of eighteen
months to serve Robert Anderson, housewright of Chester, New Hamp-
shire, were very young and served long terms. But only thirty-seven ap-
prentices, 3 per cent of the total, were placed out under the age of five.
At the other end of the scale, a few served for very short terms. Bathsheba
Rogers, for example, was apprenticed at the age of seventeen for one year
to James Mason, a farmer in Bristol County, in 1742. However, only
1.7 per cent served for less than three years, and less than 25 per cent
served terms of less than seven years.

Boys were apprenticed to sixty different trades, ranging from apothe-
cary to victualler, from bricklayer to goldsmith. The maritime trades
(sailors, navigators, and shoremen), the shipbuilding trades (mastmakers,
ship carpenters, ropemakers, sail makers, shipwrights, and sparmakers),
and the leather trades (cordwainers, saddlers, leather dressers, tanners,
and leather drapers) each accounted for about 8 per cent of the boys.
Coopers absorbed 5 per cent, and tailors about 3 per cent. House trades
and metal trades each took about 4 per cent. There was little observable
fluctuation in demand for apprentices in the various crafts, except in the
1760's. Then, coopers, shipbuilding trades, and maritime trades—all re-
lated fields—more than doubled their demand following the French and
Indian War when the seas were again safe for Massachusetts shipping.

About 40 per cent of the boys were not apprenticed to crafts but were
put out to learn husbandry. Prior to the 1770's, agriculture, although it
was the leading field to which poor boys were apprenticed, drew fewer ap-
prentices than did the crafts, and it actually declined to about 5 per cent
of the total in the 1760's. But in the 1770's and thereafter, agriculture
once again became the leading field and, in fact, took more poor boys than

8 This and the following paragraphs concerning the poor apprentices are based on the
the table of indentures below.
all the crafts put together—60 per cent of the boys in the 1770’s and 1780’s, 55 per cent in the 1790’s, and 86 per cent in the first six years of the nineteenth century.

Girls were apprenticed chiefly to serve as household maids. During the 1740’s and 1750’s, most of their indentures specified the trade of a spinster, but about a third of them were simply apprenticed to learn housewifery, and even the spinster probably spent most of their time doing household work. In the 1760’s the term, “spinster,” was dropped and “housewifery” took its place. From 1770 to the end of the century, knitting, sewing, and spinning were usually added to housewifery. Only two girls were taught another trade, that of mantua or mantua maker.9

The demand for poor apprentices, particularly in farming but also in housewifery, drew many boys and girls out of Boston. In the 1740’s about 67 per cent of the children were sent out of town. By the 1780’s this had increased to 89 per cent, only to drop back to 82 per cent in the 1790’s. In the first six years of the nineteenth century more than 90 per cent left Boston. All told, Boston sent away about 74 per cent of its poor apprentices—all but 126 girls and 162 boys. These country apprentices were distributed throughout Massachusetts in twelve counties and in the present state of Maine, and a few went to New Hampshire and Connecticut. About 70 per cent of all apprentices, however, were absorbed by the two eastern counties of Suffolk and Middlesex and the two western counties of Hampshire and Worcester.

The masters who took these poor children as apprentices were as varied in trade and occupation as the arts or mysteries the boys and girls were supposed to learn. There were sixty-four crafts, trades, and occupations, and three professions represented among the masters. Mariner’s and cordwainers took more apprentices than any other craftsmen or tradesmen, but yeomen, husbandmen, and farmers, all of whom were presumably engaged in agriculture, took more than any other occupation. Several masters, it should be noted, agreed to teach, or have taught, trades with which they were not familiar, or which they were themselves apparently not practicing.

Considerable variation in social rank existed among the masters. At the top of the scale were persons of some social prominence in their own communities. They included such Boston worthies as the Reverend Andrew Eliot; Josiah Warren, Gent.; Nathaniel Loring, merchant; the Reverend Oxenbridge Thatcher; and Samuel Otis, merchant. There were also such persons of standing as the Reverend John Hancock of Braintree; Robert

9 See Ann Cromartie (1769) and Ann Wilkinson (1784), below.
Indentures of Boston’s Apprentices

Treat Paine, Esq., of Taunton; John Oliver of Malden; Daniel Oliver and Levi Lincoln of Worcester; James Warren, Esq., of Plymouth; and John Langdon of New Hampshire. More than 125 masters claimed honorifics; and there were seventeen merchants, seventeen physicians, twelve ministers, two schoolmasters, and thirty or more men of officer rank in the military among the masters.

The indentures, in fact, suggest a good bit about the existence of social classes in eighteenth-century Massachusetts. From the regularity with which honorifics were entered with the names of the Overseers, for example, it can be assumed that men took their “Hon.,” “Gent.,” and “Esq.” quite seriously.1 The masters, too, were careful about their social ranking or occupational designations, although they were less so after the start of the Revolution. In the case of those engaged in agriculture, the exact social weight of the terms “Yeoman,” “Husbandman,” and “farmer” is not clear. Yet their weights relative to each other seem clear enough. “Yeoman” still retained its concept of social worth, while “Husbandman,” used far less frequently, and “farmer,” used hardly at all, seem to have been of lower rank. After 1777, however, “Yeoman” and “Husbandman” drop out of use, occupational designations even in the trades are recorded only infrequently, and “Mr.” comes into general but not universal use.

If honorifics and occupational designations were of social significance, then the bulk of the masters were drawn from the middling and upper strata of the various towns—successful craftsmen and tradesmen, securely established farmers, and a sprinkling of local leaders. Only occasionally, if at all, was a master drawn from among those who were of doubtful financial responsibility or questionable social respectability. The screening of potential masters was, as we shall see, the purpose behind a requirement that they be recommended to the Overseers by the officials who knew them best, the selectmen in the towns where they lived.

Many masters, particularly those in the smaller towns, took two apprentices, usually one to learn husbandry, the other housewifery. Paul Mandell, Gent., of Hardwick, took ten between 1760 and 1778, usually two at a time. The most he had at one time was eight. That was in February 1778 when he apprenticed William Dunn and Sarah Granger, ages seven and six years, respectively. With these two added to his household, he had a total of five girl apprentices, between the ages of six and sixteen, and three boys, between the ages of seven and sixteen. Mandell was the first person in Hardwick to take poor apprentices from Boston, but within

1 In some cases, where they had been left off, they were inserted afterwards.
a dozen years of his first apprentice's arrival in town, eight other residents had taken boys or girls from the almshouse. His contentment with his Boston servants, as measured by his return trips to the almshouse, must have communicated itself to his neighbors.

Not a great deal more can be known about most of the apprentices other than what their indentures reveal. How they were chosen, who they were, the actual conditions of life with their masters, how well they learned their trades, how well they were educated, are all questions which for the most part cannot be answered with any assurance.

The Overseers regularly perambulated their wards looking for poor people who ought to be in the workhouse or in the almshouse and, presumably, checking up on the condition of dependent children. Undoubtedly they apprenticed many children directly from their homes, but many others were taken from the almshouse. Some arrived there with one or both of their parents, some alone, and some were born there, often the illegitimate children of wayward girls. Quite a few were apparently the children of recent immigrants. While most, 57 per cent, appear to have come from families of English ancestry, about 15 per cent were from families of Irish background, about the same percentage were Scots, 5 per cent Welsh, 4 per cent French, and the rest were German, Italian, and Negro.

Once a child was in the almshouse, it was to the advantage of the Overseers to get him apprenticed quickly to avoid the cost of food, clothing, and housing. It was also to the advantage of the child to get out as quickly as possible. The almshouse, like other eighteenth-century public institutions was probably not an attractive place to be.

Cotton Mather wrote in the records of the Second Church for 4 April 1697, that one Abigail Day had complained bitterly about the food at the almshouse, saying that "she would thank neither God nor Man for such Victuals," and about the master of the house, who, she said, "had several

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2 See the Miscellaneous Files (by date) of the Overseers of the Poor, Department of Public Welfare, Boston, Massachusetts.
4 This estimate is based on a random sampling of the names of four hundred apprentices checked against Eldon C. Smith, Dictionary of American Family Names (New York, 1956). In 1790, it may be pointed out, Massachusetts' population was composed roughly of the following linguistic and national stocks: English, 83 per cent; Scotch, 4.6 per cent; Ulster Irish, 1.6 per cent; Irish, 1.3 per cent; German, .3 per cent; Dutch, .2 per cent; and French, .8 per cent. See "Report of the Committee on Linguistic and National Stocks in the Population of the United States," American Historical Association, Annual Report for 1931 (Washington, D.C. 1932), 1, 184.
Times made Attempts upon her Chastity. More than a century later the almshouse was still having difficulty. A committee, charged with constructing new vaults for the privies reported that they had had to construct new sewers. "The drain from the pump and kitchen," the report said, "being originally turned through the privies, opened a direct communication into the body of the house for the foul air, not only of the drain but that air was surcharged with the fetidity of the vaults, so that on the rising of the tide, especially when accompanied with an east wind, the stench was not only diffused through the yard, but entered thro' the sink into . . . the body of the house."  

Whether or not these pictures indicate the true nature of the food, the morals, and the smells of the almshouse, they suggest that getting out was a good thing. The chance came when a prospective master applied for an apprentice. If he lived in Boston, he needed no written recommendation, for presumably he was known to the Overseers of the Poor. But if he was from out of town, he had to have a letter of recommendation from the majority of his selectmen. By 1758 these recommendations had been printed with blanks for names and dates. According to the printed formula, the master was to be "a Man of sober Life and Conversation; and in such Circumstances [that the selectman could] recommend him as a fit Person to bind an Apprentice to."  

If the master found a child to his liking, he might take him home on trial before signing the indentures. The selectmen of Rehoboth, for example, wrote the Overseers on 8 November 1776, about one Elizabeth Barber, a poor girl of Boston who had been living with James Thurber, Esq., for some time. "As she proves to be an Industrious likely girl and is Very desirous to Tarry with the family and they well affected towards her," she would be happily situated if she could be bound out to Thurber. On 9 December 1776, the Overseers signed her indentures, binding her for four years. Other children were not so fortunate as to like and be liked. Esther Burgean, ten years old in 1772, was one of these. Her master, David Durfee of Dartmouth, had apparently not completed the process of apprenticing her two years earlier when indentures had been drawn.

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6 Completed copies of this form are scattered throughout the volumes in which the indentures, below, are bound. Boston Indentures, 1734-1805, 6 vols., City Clerk's office, City Hall, Boston.

6 Ibid., iv. 163.
binding Esther to him for ten years. On 27 November 1773, he sent her back to Boston with a letter saying that he found her "not to Answer my expectations in any respect she being of so Dull and Stupid Capacity as not to be capable of doing any Service of account, nor to be Learnt to any Tolerable degree either to Work or Read as hath been declared by her Tutors...."

Once a child was bound, he was not ordinarily cause for further concern on the part of the Overseers until the time came to exchange indentures at the end of his term of service. Only occasionally did the Overseers have to bind out an apprentice anew or make some other arrangement for him. So far as the records reveal, for example, only one apprentice was freed to enlist in military service, although there were probably others whose masters did not bother to let the Overseers know. Even the death of the master did not ordinarily require that the apprentice be bound out again, for the indentures almost invariably specified that the servant was being bound to the master, his wife, and his heirs. In fact, since the contract bound both parties, the one to service, the other to provide keep and training, the master's estate was liable for fulfillment of the terms. A letter of 3 November 1782, from Samuel Cutler, administrator of the estate of one William Atkins, Esq., of Newburyport, shows the problems that could arise because of these conditions. He reported that Peggy Kilgore, bound out on 8 June 1782, for eleven years, was ill, and the heirs wanted to return her to the almshouse. "I can assure you, Gentlemen," Cutler wrote, "that it will be a great hardship upon the Heirs to maintain her, the Estate being but small and three unmarried Daughters to be maintained by it. I do not conceive by the Indentures that the Estate is obliged to maintain her after she is rendered incapable, by sickness, to perform what she was bound to do. Should I be mistaken, We rely on your Charity and generosity to grant this our petition."

Other children, for reasons mostly unknown, were turned over to different masters before their terms were up, but that too was a rare occasion. In 1770, for example, one Thomas Banks, after nine years with William Williams, Gent., of Hatfield, was apprenticed to a cordwainer named Belding of that town to learn his trade. Apparently all parties, the masters, the servant, and the Overseers were satisfied with the change. Most relieved, was Williams, who had written the Overseers about his unhappy experiences with Banks. "For the first four years," he said, "I schooled

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8 Ibid., iv. 63.
9 John Ruggles to Overseers, n.d., ibid., iv. 103.
10 Ibid., v. 14.
him constantly at the Town school here, and a considerable part of every year since, except of last. He is now seventeen years ... old and about as big as an ordinary Country boy of thirteen ... and ... scarcely able to perform the service of one of our boys of that age—I have been sensible some time that it would by no means answer to bring him up to husbandry. He will never be capable to perform the Labour or to endure the fatigues that are the unavoidable lot of the husbandman—I therefore attempted more than a year ago to get him a Trade, but the notion which then generally (and with too much foundation in truth) prevailed of his being a Rogue in grain prevented the success of these attempts at that Time—

Information is even more lacking on what happened to the apprentices after they completed their service than it is on their condition while servants. What happened to them? Were they incorporated into the society, or were they likely to become dependent again? In short, how successful was the system as far as the apprentices themselves were concerned? This is an extremely difficult question, one susceptible of definitive answer only if a representative sample of the apprentices could be followed throughout their lives.

What can be done at this point, however, is to lay out the extremes of success and failure and hazard a guess as to what happened to those in between. Isaiah Thomas is the success story. Although he ran away from Fowle at the age of eighteen, he returned to Boston in 1770 and rejoined his former master, this time as a partner in publishing the Massachusetts Spy. In 1771, he took an apprentice, another poor boy put out by the Overseers of the Poor. The rest of his story is well known.8

At the other extreme was Mary Butcher. Mary became an apprentice of Richard Storckney, yeoman of Stoughton, in 1754 when she was but an infant. For fifty years thereafter she left no record; but in 1804 she turned up in Canton, poor, unmarried, and lame. The Overseers there, after keeping her fed and housed awhile, wrote to the Overseers in Boston. "She is," they said, "a person whom nature has not been over bountiful in furnishing her mental faculties..." Should they keep her there at Boston's charge, or send her home? On the back of this letter is an endorsement by a resigned Boston Overseer: "Ans. 3 July and said, send her in."9

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8 William Williams to Rev. Tyley, 23 January 1770, ibid., iv. 15.
9 The apprentice was Anthony Haswell (1771), below. For Thomas, see note 3 on page 418 above.
10 Overseers of the Poor of Canton, Massachusetts, to Overseers of Boston, 25 June 1805, "Papers, 1733-1854," Overseers Records.
Between these two extremes fell the mass of the apprentices. All had learned to read and write, or, at least, were promised reading and writing, and all males were promised ciphering as well. All were exposed to the skills or the routine tasks whereby they could earn their livings as artisans, farmers, or housewives. Their formal and practical training was the equivalent of that of the average maid of eighteen or youth of twenty-one in eighteenth-century Massachusetts. They were prepared to enter life, not as wards of society, but as individuals whose economic lives and social statuses would be determined in part by their own efforts. Yet, unlike other young adults, they did not have families standing behind them prepared to provide assistance in getting a start in life. Their freedom dues, which might have served that purpose, were usually limited to two suits of clothing. Except in a very few instances, indentures did not specify a gift of tools or other tangible assets. Only in the case of boys apprenticed to farming, beginning in the 1760's, did indentures specify a cash payment as part of the freedom dues. At first this payment amounted to £13 6s 0d. In the 1770's, 1780's, and early 1790's it was £20, and thereafter it amounted to about £70.

To the males given training in a craft, the future must have seemed fairly bright. Craftsmen of all kinds were generally in short supply in eighteenth-century America, and the skilled worker of industrious habits and a little luck could easily find work as a journeyman in the cities, towns, and villages. There were, for example, more than 140 different trades being practiced in Boston in the 1790's. On the other hand, the chances of being apprenticed to a trade instead of to husbandry were considerably less by the 1780's and 1790's than they had been in the middle of the century. Moreover, without freedom dues in cash or tools, a good many years of service as a journeyman probably awaited the poor apprentice when he was freed. Out of seventy boys apprenticed to tradesmen in Boston between 1760 and 1790, for example, only three are listed as masters of their own trades in the Boston Directory for 1796. They are Joseph Lilly, apprenticed in 1771 and working as a tailor on Middle Street; William Pierce, apprenticed in 1761 and working as a hairdresser with a shop on Marshall's Lane and a house on Union Street; and

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8 Isaiah Thomas claimed that his master did not instruct him in reading or writing. In fact, he claimed that Fowle was unable to spell or punctuate. See Thomas's "Diary," American Antiquarian Society. Between 1786 and 1792, most girl apprentices were to be taught reading, writing, and ciphering.
James McCleary, apprenticed in 1771 and working as a tobacconist with a shop at number 8 Butler's Row and a house on Windmill Walk. The others had either left Boston for other towns or were still working as journeymen or laborers.

The same pattern probably existed among the boys apprenticed to husbandry. With luck, a boy might marry the farmer's daughter and be set up by the family on new land or inherit the house and land of the family into which he had married. But without luck, he probably had to serve for years as a hired hand before he would be in a position to farm for himself. The freedom dues in cash, about the equivalent of a half-year's wages, would hardly sustain a man as a farmer if he were starting from scratch. Without a family behind him to ease the burden of the first years, a man starting farming even in those relatively simple times probably required more capital than he had at his disposal.

As for the girls, there was no likelihood or expectation that they would become independent. Their choices were limited to continuing as paid household servants or getting married. In this they differed little from their sisters who were fortunate enough to have families to sustain them. Their choice of husbands was limited, however, by the fact that they had no dowries to bring to their marriages and no one but their masters to seek marriage matches for them.

At its worst, poor apprenticeship was only a temporary condition, not a permanent status. It provided a means not only of retraining the poor into society as useful working members but also of reducing the cost of supporting public institutions. In a day when manufacturing was largely in the hands of craftsmen, when most people worked on farms, when women had few opportunities anyway, and when education beyond primary school level was the province of the few, it was probably as workable a system as could be devised. What had begun in the seventeenth century as a means of insuring moral and religious conformity had ended up as a valuable and workable social institution. Unlike slavery, which died out in the 1780's and 1790's in Massachusetts, poor apprenticeship seemed to fit the needs of a free society.

* Ibid., x. 264, 274, 267.

* Only one apprentice was assured land in his indentures. Francis Dizer (7/24/66), who was apprenticed to both husbandry and surveying, was promised twenty acres of unimproved land and, if he behaved himself, a set of surveying instruments. Two boys were promised cattle: Richard Caswell (8/3/48), a yoke of oxen or four o.t., and Barzallai Eddy (10/10/48), two three-year-old oxen and a heifer of the same age.
The table of indentures of poor apprentices which follows is based on the original printed forms bound in six volumes located in the City Clerk’s office, City Hall, Boston, Massachusetts. Several years ago Dr. Stephen T. Riley of the Massachusetts Historical Society told me about them. Subsequently they were microfilmed for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia. The indentures through 1776 were transcribed in tabular form by Mr. W. Graham Millar, who kindly gave me a copy of his tables. Those from 1777 on were transcribed by Mrs. Beverley Schell, secretary at the Institute, largely on her own time and as a labor of love for history. I have subsequently proofread the new table, here presented, against the originals.

The table below is an abstract and does not carry all the information available on the indentures. Conspicuously absent are the freedom dues, discussed above. There is such a regularity in these dues that it does not seem worthwhile to take the space to list them. Variations in formal educational requirements have also been discussed in the text, and they are omitted in the table except for an occasional footnote. No column has been provided for the masters’ occupations, but a careful reader will find those occupations if he understands that from 1734 to 1779, the period when occupations were almost always listed, the master’s occupation was the same as that being taught unless otherwise indicated by footnote. From 1780 to 1805, when occupations for masters were rarely given, every master whose occupation is on the indenture has his occupation listed by footnote. Finally, to conserve space I have abbreviated trades in the table by leaving out vowels. Except in such cases as prk mkr (peruke maker) and mntu mkr (manteau maker), this should cause no serious difficulty.

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1 W. Graham Millar, “The Poor Apprentices of Boston; Indentures of Poor Children Bound Out by the Overseers of the Poor of Boston, 1734-1776 . . . .” M.A. Thesis, College of William and Mary, 1938.