

The Boston Workhouse Rules of Management, 1739

The following are the regulations that were drawn up by the Overseers of the Poor under the authority of the 1735 Workhouse Act. These were presented to a committee of the Town Meeting and amended and passed by the Town Meeting of October 12, 1739. The text is in manuscript in Overseers, box 13, folder 1, and in published form in the Boston Records 12:234–40. According to Wiberley, 90, these are the only surviving "detailed workhouse regulations from the colonial period." While details of the Workhouse population do not exist, as they do for the Almshouse, the Workhouse rules offer a rare glimpse into the behavioral standards and the operational regimen of an eighteenth-century American workhouse that was intended to employ gainfully the chronically unemployed or unemployable, and to correct and rehabilitate the idle poor. It is not known how much, if any, of the corporal punishment noted here was ever carried out. This is a slightly abridged copy of the Rules and Orders:

Rules and Orders for the Management of Workhouse lately Erected in the Town of Boston; for Employing and Maintaining the Idle and Poor, belonging to said Town.

Labor improbus omnia vincit

The General Method [Contents] ...

Rules and Orders for the Management of the Work
House in Boston

I Rules relating to the Overseers of the Poor who, by Law have the Direction of the said House.

1. That there shall be a General Meeting of the Overseers at the House, the third Tuesday of every Month, at three O'Clock in the Afternoon, to inspect all Accounts, and examin [sic] into the Behaviour of the People committed to the House, and their own Officers and Servants, and to redress all Difficulties that occur to the Master, and to consider all Complaints Made by the Poor, and to consult and advise about such further Rules and Methods as may be for the advantage of said House.

2. That a Committee of the Overseers, consisting of Three (Two of which are impowered to act) take the more immediate Inspection of the House for one month by turns . . .

II Rules relating to the Master and Mistress of the House,

1. That the Master and Mistress be Persons of approv'd Integrity and Ability, Who shall be chosen annually . . . [T]he Overseers . . . shall have Power to Agree with [them] for their Yearly Salaries: But if the . . . Master and Mistress be found guilty of immoral or irregular behaviour, the Overseers [can] dismiss them, and place others in their room.

2. That the Master keep a Register of the Names, Ages, Occupations and Places of Nativity, and of their last abode, of all Persons . . . Admitted into the House, as well as an Account of the Time of their Entry and of their Deaths or Dismission from the House.

3. That the Master keep the Gates, at all times, well Secured . . . And if any be desirous to see, or speak with any Persons committed to the House, the Doorkeeper is not to call them, Without leave: And if any Person be suspected of bringing in any strong Liquors, or carrying out any thing, belonging to the House, or any Person therein, the Doorkeeper is to stop them, and give notice to the Master, that so due Enquiry and Search may be made forthwith, and the Guilty punished: But yet all such, as in an orderly way, would see the House, shall be treated with proper Respect and Civility, by the Master, and in his absence by the next officer of the House.

4. That Master at the Hours appointed for going to Bed, which in the Summer . . . shall be at Ten O'Clock, and in the Winter . . . at Nine O'Clock shall see all fires and Lights extinguished, Excepting what shall be absolutely necessary, and that these be left under proper care.

5. That the Mistress take care that the Victuals be well and reasonably Dress'd, the Bread and Beer prepared according to the Direction of the Overseers; that the Rooms be Swept, and Beds made every Day; that the Windows be frequently Opened for Airing the House; that the House shall be Washed, as often as shall be judg'd

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necessary; that the Table-Linnen, Dishes &c, be clean; that the People be kept clean and neat in their Apparel, and have clean Linnen to Shift Once every Week, and the Beds Shifted Once a Month in the Summer Season

6. That the Master buy the Provisions, and Materials for Work, and other Necessaries; and dispose of what is Manufactured, to the best advantage, according to the Advice and Directions of the Overseers... .

7. That the Master keep Books of Accounts of all Expences, and Profits of the House, to be Pass'd upon, and allowed by the Overseers... to be Open to the Inspection of the Town, whenever they shall see cause to appoint a Committee

That the first Book contain An Inventory of all Furniture, Linnen and Woolen Cloathing bought, and of the necessary Utensils belonging to said House, with an Account how they are disposed of.

That the next Book Contain An Account of all the Provisions &c bought; as also the Quantities of each Sort Expended every Day, and of the Number of Persons provided for, each Day.

And that the last Book contain An Account of all the Stock, and Materials for Carrying on the Work of the House, which has been purchased, or sent to be manufactured, as also the Names of the Persons by whom sent; with an Account how such Goods are disposed of, and the Profits arising on the same.

8. That the Master and Mistress be Obliged to Observe such further Rules ... made by the Overseers ... Agreeable to the Law of the Province.

III. Rules relating to the Persons that shall be Admitted into the House,

1. That None shall be Admitted without a written Order, under the Hand of One or more of the Overseers.

2. That upon their Admission, they be Examin'd, Whether they are free from Lice and foul Distemper; And such as shall not be found clean, shall be put into some particular Room, 'till they be perfectly cleans'd: And that they be Obliged to take Care to keep themselves Wash'd and Comb'd, and their Cloathes neat and whole, and to Change their Linnen Once a Week.

3. That they Several Persons in the House constantly Repair at the stated Hours to their proper Apartments: where they shall work orderly at such Business, and so many Hours as the Overseers shall direct.

4. That they constantly attend the Worship of God, in the House and observe the Rules prescribed for their Meals.

5. That when any Children shall be Received into the House, there shall be some suitable Women appointed to attend them; Who are to take Care that they are Wash'd, Comb'd and Dressed every Morning, and be Taught to Read, and Instructed in the Holy Scriptures and Assemblies Catechism,...And that the rest of their Time be employ'd in such Work as shall be Assigned them; And when they arrive to a suitable [sic] Age They shall be Bound out into good Families, as the Law directs.

6. That when any Persons are taken Sick, they shall be removed into the Alms-House,



if it be done with Safety, and be put under the Care of said House 'till further Order: But if a removal shall be judg'd dangerous, then they shall have a Nurse and the Town's Physician to attend them, where they are.

IV. Rules relating to the Work and Employment of the People in the House,

1. That the Bell shall be rung every Morning to call the Family up; and such Persons as are able, shall repair to the several Places appointed for them to do their work in, and shall be kept diligently at work from Such Hours in the Morning, to such Hours in the Evening, as the Overseers shall from time to time direct; Excepting so much time as shall be allow'd for Meals, and Religious Worship.

2. That the common Work of the House be Picking of Oakum, Unless for such Trades-Men, whose Business may be well accomodated [sic] in the House, and it shall be judged more profitable to employ them in their proper Trades; Such as Taylors, Shoemakers, Mopmakers, Nailers &c. And that such of the Women as are capable, be employ'd in Carding, and Spinning Wooll, Flax, Yarn for Mops, and Cotton Yarn for Candlewick, Knitting, Sewing &c. But that these things be determined and regulated by the Overseers, or their Committee.

3. That Whereas the Poverty and Ruin of many Families is often Owing to the Idleness and Viscious Courses of one of the Heads of it, more particularly of the Masters, Who may have been bred to some good Trade, that by Industry would comfortably support them, the rest of the Family being Industrious, and in a capacity of Earning something considerable towards their own Support, so that it might be judg'd proper to order said Persons up to the House and Employ them there; In that case, An Account shall be kept of their Earnings, and after a reasonable deduction for their Maintenance in the House, the Overplus shall be applied to the Support of their Family in such Ways and Methods, as the Overseers or their Committee shall direct.

V. Rules relating to the Diet and Victualling of the House, and the proper Seasons thereof,

1. That the Overseers shall... as often as they ... judge necessary... Agree upon the Diet of the House, to be continued 'till further Order... to the Master for his direction.

2. That the Hour of Dining be Twelve a Clock, at which time the People of the House shall all be called together, and Dine in one room (if it will contain them) having their Tables cover'd with sutable Cloths, Dishes Trenchers &c. and the Commons for the Day, as directed by the Overseers: That None be allowed to Dine in their separate rooms, unless in case of indisposition: But that as to their Breakfast and Supper, it may be dilivered to them out of the Kitchen, between the Hours of Eight to Nine in the Morning, and of Six and Seven in the Evening.

3. That they be allowed from the Hour of Twelve to One for the time of Dining; and that from Eight to Nine in the Morning, and from Six to Seven in the Evening, be allowed for the other Meal times, and for Attendance on Divine Worship.

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VI. Rules relating to the Religious Worship of the House,

1. That the Master every Morning . . . and every Evening . . . Call the People together, and Read a sutable portion of the Holy Scriptures to them, and Pray with them; And as often as they Eat together, Ask a Blessing, and return Thanks.
2. That he take especial Care, that the Sabbath be duly Observed; And besides the Morning and Evening Service, he shall be Obliged (until other provision be made) to call the whole Family together, at least One part of the Day, and spend a sutable portion of Time in Praying, Singing of Psalms and Reading some practical discourses of Divinity, that shall be Appointed by the Overseers.

VII. Rules relating to the Government of the House, both with and respect to Rewards and Punishments.

1. That all Immoralities and Disobedience to the Government of the House, and other Misbehaviour, be by the Master noted in a Book, and laid before the Overseers, or their Committee; that by their Authority and Admonition, such Rudeness and Immorality may be restrained, and Peace and good Order maintained, and all obstinate, perverse and unruly Persons punished, according to their Crimes.
2. That such as shall duly Observe the fore-going Order, and faithfully Perform their several Tasks shall be Intitled to One penny out of every Shilling they Earn, to be disposed of by the Overseers for their [inmates'] greater Comfort.
3. That Whereas some slothful Persons may pretend Sickness or Lameness, to excuse themselves from Labour: It is Ordered, That such Persons shall pass a proper Examination by the Physician; And if it should Appear upon his Report and other concurring Circumstances that those Persons made false Excuses they shall be punished by such an Addition of Labour To their daily Stint or some other way, as the Overseers . . . shall determine.
4. That no Person presume to Smoke Tobacco in their Beds, On penalty of being denied Smoking for One week; And that if convicted a Second Time, He or She shall be punished as for other Misdemeanours.
5. That no Person presume to Beg Money, or any other thing, directly or indirectly, from any Person, that shall come to Visit the House, on penalty of being denied their next Meal.
6. That no Person presume to go out of the House without Liberty; And that every One who Obtains leave, shall return in good Order, at the time appointed, On penalty of being denied going out for One Month for the first Offence, and for Three Months for every Offence afterwards.
7. That no Person shall Neglect to repair to their proper places for Work; Or being there, shall refuse to work, loiter or be idle; Or shall not well perform the Task of work set them; Or shall waste or spoil any of the Materials, or Toolles of the several Manufactures; Or shall deface the Walls, or break the Windows, Or shall disturb the House by Clamour, Quarelling or Fighting or abusive Language; Or shall bring any

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strong Liquors into the House without Leave; Or shall be Absent from Divine Service without reasonable Excuse; Or prophane the Sabbath; Or carry it disrespectfully to their Governours; Or shall be Guilty of Lying, or wanton and lascivious Behaviour; Or shall Drink to Excess, Steal or prophanely Curse and Swear; Or in any Other respect Act immorally or irregularly, they shall be Punished, either by denying them a Meal, or Whole days allowance, or by Gaging, or causing them to wear a Collar round about their Necks with a wooden Clog to it, or by Obliging them to stand on a Stool in a publick Place, with a Paper fix'd on their Breast, denoting their Crime in Capitals, for the space of One Hour, Or by Ordering them into a Dungeon to be kept with Bread and Water, not exceeding Forty Eight Hours, Or by an Addition of Labour to their daily Task, according to the nature and circumstance of the Crime; and in Case of frequent repetition and Obstiancy in their Crimes, they shall be Punished by Order of One or more Justices of the Peace, by removal into Bridewell, or otherwise as the Law directs.

8. That the Committee of Overseers, at their Weekly Meeting, have Power to punish all breaches of the foregoing Orders, Excepting those that are referred to the Cognizance of a Justice of Peace: And in all such Cases a Majority of the Overseers shall be called together.

9. That the Master of the House have Power, in the intervals between the Meetings of the Committee of the Overseers, to punish the breaches of the foregoing Orders, according to the Instructions he shall receive in writing from the Overseers or Directors of the House from time to time; And that in the Cases of Difficulty Arising, which may need a more speedy Consideration, he shall call the Committee together for their Advice and Assistance.

10. That if any Person in the House shall discover any other Person who shall be Guilty of any of the foregoing Offences, Such Person shall receive some such Reward or Incouragement as shall be Ordered by the Overseers or their Committee: And, if any Person shall know of any of the Offences aforesaid, and doth not discover the same, Such Person shall be Punished according to the discretion of the Overseers.

11. That the foregoing Rules and Orders of the House be publickly Read, every Monday Morning, that none may plead or pretend Ignorance of them.

THE END

Appendices

The Diet of the House for the first Quarter.

	Breakfast	Dinner	Supper
Lords Day			
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Fryday			
Saturday			

N.B. Small Beer to be given as there may be Occasion.^a

^aThis dietary chart was left blank in the manuscript and in the Town Meeting minutes.

In addition to the very comprehensive rules in the 1739 regulations, the Town Meeting periodically adjusted the conditions of behaviour and management. One such amendment survives in manuscript form in Overseers box 13, folder 1, and is attached to the manuscript containing the 1739 codes.

The Overseers finding it necessary, for the better Governing the House, to make some further Rules for the Conduct of the Master; Have accordingly on this fith day of April 1758 it being their monthly meeting past [passed] these which follow:

1st That he do not release any person from the House untill he has obtained the consent of the major part of the Overseers under their hands, at some general meeting, and that he permit no person to go out on any other occasion without the consent of the ruling Overseer.

2 That so often as he shall be directed by four of the Overseers; (the Chairman allways to be one) to warn a generall Meeting, he do it immediately; and if the occasion of the meeting be for the release of any person from the House, He also notify for whom the application is made taking especial care to warn those gentlemen who signed their Commitment.

3 That he take care none be admitted to speak with any person committed to the House when he is absent, and that he himself admit none, unless he can attend them to the Room be within hearing of all that may pass and see that they are out of the yard before he leave them.

4 That he so contrive his out door business as to be allways at home between the hours of Eight and Ten in the morning to wait on the ruling Overseer, and to attend such as may in an orderly manner desire to speak with their Friends.

5 That at every monthly meeting he lay before the Overseers the commitment as well as the release of every person received into or discharged from the House the month past.