

The Eighteenth-Century Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor



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The Almshouse and Workhouse



increased demand for institutional relief, the means and ends of poor relief were not affected by the Revolution in the short term. It would take a revolution in thinking about poor relief to bring substantial change to the means and ends of public charity in Massachusetts generally and in Boston in particular.¹²⁹

Even then, there were some changes in the characteristics of the poor as they were entered into the control of the Overseers. The records show a more cosmopolitan Almshouse constituency, with clerks self-consciously referring to foreigners, and after the war to “Brittanors.” Following the Massachusetts emancipation of slaves, the period after 1780 shows many more African Americans entering the Almshouse as their freedom simultaneously made many of them instant paupers. Although they represented only 6 to 7 percent of all Almshouse admissions, their proportion of the Boston population was only 4 to 5 percent. After 1780 the rate of African-American admissions was about double the rate of the 1770s and nearly three times greater than the 1760s rates.¹³⁰

Moreover, the volume of all admissions tripled after Boston’s recovery in the early 1780s. Boston’s population had shrunk dramatically in the mid-1770s because of the war, partial depopulation, and the devastation of the area’s economy. And here the major trend in poor relief in the post-independence era is most clearly revealed in the Almshouse records. In the period from 1774 to 1779 only about one-third of admissions were on the “province charge,” while for the five-year period after 1783 the figure jumped to 63 percent and then to 68 percent in the early 1790s. The figures were reliably reported because of the budgetary advantages to the Overseers of distinguishing town charges from province charges. Also, because the law required Selectmen as well as an Overseer to admit out-of-town persons to the Almshouse, the out-of-town charges are more easily recognized in the record, as town admissions show only the Overseer’s name.¹³¹ Before 1774 the records do not always indicate the residential status of the inmate and cite only Overseers for all entries, and estimates of town to province admissions ratios are difficult to establish. The following estimates indicate the trend in admissions from a predominantly Boston cast to a broader regional, national and international one:

Total entries charged to	Town	Province (“State” after 1782)
8/29/1774 to 8/28/1779	233	80 (34%) Percentages rounded off.
1/2/1783 to 8/30/1787	194	327 (63%)
1/1/1789 to 12/31/93	354	741 (68%)
1/1/1794 to end of 1800	1,152	1,141 (50%)

Foreigners, which now included Britons, were charged to the state, and in the 1790s the proportion of Almshouse admissions identified as foreigners rose significantly. A random sample of the recorded origins (“towns they belong to”) from the 1795–1800 period shows that 43 percent of all Almshouse admissions were from outside the United States. Boston and Massachusetts combined for 47 percent, and the remaining 10 percent came from elsewhere in the United States. Of those on the 1791–1792 Warning Out lists, approximately 25 percent were identified as foreigners,