

Overseers of the poor: Oxford letters portray the plight of town paupers

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REGION — The war on poverty is a contemporary movement but being poor in western Maine is nothing new.

Paupers. Inmates. Insane. Indigents. Transients. Tramps. Those were the names used for the poor in the past. Today this socio-economic class has been assigned more sensitive labels that include phrases like challenged, at-risk and insecure. But the presence of the poor in communities has been constant over time.

Strategies on caring for the poor since Europeans began settling in the Americas have varied. Only in the 20th century have American systems pivoted away from systems rooted in English law, specifically the 1601 Poor Law Act and the 1662 Settlement Laws.

The 1601 Poor Law Act was a series of laws that authorized local governments to raise taxes for the purpose of supporting the helpless, which included the elderly, handicapped and those otherwise worthy poor, as well as those involuntarily unemployed or vagrants.

Those involuntarily unemployed would receive support in exchange for their labor. Vagrants and other able-bodied people who refused to work could be imprisoned.

The 1662 Settlement Laws allowed local authorities to restrict aid to and expel the poor from their towns if they were not recognized as settled residents.

These ancient laws persevered for centuries and were adopted as the New World was colonized.

Once Maine achieved statehood in 1820 it became necessary for its young government to create a comprehensive program to deal with those in poverty. This was achieved with The Maine Pauper Act, legislation largely based on Massachusetts laws that dated back to those 17th-century precedents.

The Maine Pauper Act, passed on March 21, 1821, established that care for the poor was the responsibility of the towns where each person resided, mirroring centuries-old policies. Any expenses incurred caring for people from other communities were to be billed to their town of settlement; the overseers of the poor would also direct their counterparts in other towns to remove the persons back to their original place of residence.

Overseers of the poor, an official title still carried today to elected selectmen, were charged with assessing and caring for the poor. Overseers used three basic means to deal with paupers.

One was to board the poor in private homes and reimburse the homeowner for seeing to the basic needs of feeding and clothing them. This was the practice for people deemed helpless.

Another method, discontinued in 1847, was to auction each pauper off to the lowest bidder – something akin to slavery, especially of children who had been orphaned or whose families could not support them.

The third was to provide whatever provisions were necessary for those in poverty to remain in their own homes, in their towns of legal settlement.



Letters from the Oxford Historical Society's town archives depict the responsibilities and expenses of caring for paupers in the 1800s. Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat

Towns often resisted following their part of the Maine Pauper Act, as years of correspondence from the mid-1800s between Oxford's selectmen and those from other towns show. Oxford, which was incorporated in 1829 after separating from Hebron, often had to be prodded by neighboring towns to pay for its poor who one way or the other ended up on their "books."

One May 9, 1831, letter from Minot's overseers of the poor demonstrates the sparring towns engaged in over paying the care of those in poverty.

"Gentlemen Overseers of the Poor of Oxford,

"We are sorry that you do not recognize Mr. Amos Clifford and family as legal inhabitants of your town. We insist on their belonging to the Town of Oxford for the following reason Viz. The said Amos has gained no settlement of his own and therefore must follow the settlement of his father.

The case in our view is so evident as to require no further explanation. We shall insist on a settlement shortly.

Respectfully yours,

Per Order

Otis Nelson (one of the Overseers of the Poor of Minot)"

With Oxford being a newly formed town, one can assume that the expense and responsibility of caring for its poor was not well organized and had to be established within new geographic boundaries.

The letters, part of the Oxford Historical Society's archive, span the period between 1831 and 1846. Those addressed to Oxford demanded that officials remove its legal residents from the neighboring town with consistent reference to provisions of the Maine Pauper Act, and to lawfully pay for them. Even as selectmen in a town such as Oxford resisted compliance, they would also take the same actions regarding paupers from away that they found themselves paying for.

Overseers of the poor often referred to the specific date a pauper became "chargeable" in neighboring towns, as one letter from Fryeburg selectmen to Oxford selectmen indicates. While the records are often on scraps of paper, they followed a consistent format documenting the other community's expenses.

"Fryeburg Apr. 26th, 1833

To the gentlemen Overseers of the Poor of the town of Oxford,

Jonathan Lucas and his wife and his daughters of your town fell into distress in this town on the nineteenth day of March last and have from that time been supported by this town – and the expenses thereof, we have and shall continue to charge to your town until you remove them – which you are required to do soon.

Judah (sic) Dana

John Stevens

George Willy

Selectmen & Overseers of the Poor of the town of Fryeburg"

Aside from being fed, clothed and otherwise provided for, medical expenses could be incurred for whole families. This was the case for the William Hutchins family from Oxford, which had become chargeable in the town of Cambridge in 1835.

Cambridge officials sent repeated notices to Oxford detailing the mounting expenses and then the deaths of Hutchins and his youngest child from consumption. There were doctors' and funeral bills as well as bills for boarding his widow and surviving children in town. Cambridge did not want to continue supporting the family and declared that Mrs. Hutchins herself was requesting to be removed back to Oxford. The archive did not include a record of how this case was ultimately resolved.

The legal tradition of removing the impoverished from communities that did not wish to care for them would continue until the 20th century.

But other, more organized programs would eventually be created. After the 1830s many rural towns began to use the practice used by larger cities inside and outside the state, creating almshouses (poor houses) where the poor would collectively reside as "inmates."

In Maine the result was the rise of the town farm, to be explored next week in another article.

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