

# ***History from the Bottom Up: A Study of the Poor in Preindustrial New York City, 1784-1830***

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Contemporary concern about poverty and cities, racism and civil rights, democracy and civil liberties, peace and war has led to a new examination of the American past by a new generation of scholars. The contentions of the consensus historians are no longer accepted uncritically, as American history is rewritten "from the bottom up."<sup>1</sup> Recent research challenges especially the idea of economic democracy in early America. A variety of historical studies has demonstrated the absence of an open and mobile society, the lack of opportunity for economic and social advancement, an intensified social stratification, a high degree of unemployment among unskilled laborers and immigrants, and the prevalence of poverty and pauperism in early urban America.<sup>2</sup>

In post-Revolutionary New York City, which experienced the most rapid growth rate of any American city between 1790 and 1830, the reality

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<sup>1</sup> The best recent example of this kind of history may be found in Barton J. BERNSTEIN, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jackson Turner MAIN, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, 1965); James A. HENRETTA, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXII (Jan. 1965), 75-92; Raymond A. MOHL, "Poverty in Early America, A Reappraisal: The Case of Eighteenth-Century New York City," *New York History*, L (Jan. 1969), 5-27; James T. LEMMON and Gary B. NASH, "The Distribution of Wealth in Eighteenth-Century America: A Century of Change in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1693-1802," *Journal of Social History*, II (Fall 1968), 1-24; Kenneth LOCKRIDGE, "Land, Population and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630-1790," *Past and Present*, XXXIX (Apr. 1968), 62-80; Aubrey C. LAND, "Economic Base and Social Structure: The Northern Chesapeake in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History*, XXV (Dec. 1965), 639-654; Staughton LYNDE, "Who Should Rule at Home? Dutchess County, New York, in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XVIII (July 1961), 332; Jesse LEMISCH, "The American Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up," in BERNSTEIN, ed., *Towards a New Past*, 3-45; David MONTGOMERY, "The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780-1830," *Labor History*, IX (Winter 1968), 3-22; Gilbert OSOFSKY, "The Enduring Ghetto," *Journal of American History*, LV (Sep. 1968), 243-255; and Douglas T. MILLER, "Immigration and Social Stratification in Pre-Civil War New York," *New York History*, XLIX (Apr. 1968), 157-168. On the later nineteenth century, see Stephan TERNSTROM, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964).

of poverty could not be hidden.<sup>3</sup> British evacuation in November 1783 left a ruined city plagued by social and economic dislocation. Among pressing concerns of the new municipal government, care of the indigent and unemployed assumed a high place. In February 1784 one newspaper reported more than 1,000 families on the relief rolls.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting "on the want and distress which are so prevalent at this severe Season," newly-appointed Mayor James Duane declined the accustomed public entertainment and requested instead that aldermen distribute donations to the poor in their wards.<sup>5</sup> At the request of the Common Council, several clergymen made charity collections in their churches to ameliorate "the wretched condition not only of the poor but of many Householders."<sup>6</sup> Mayor Duane and his successor, Richard Varick, worried about the overcrowded condition of the alms house; the peace of the city was continuously disturbed by "an idle and profligate Banditti . . . and by other abandoned Vagrants and Prostitutes." "Vagrants multiply on our Hands to an amazing Degree," Varick wrote in 1788.<sup>7</sup>

Immigration swelled the alms house and the poor lists during the 1790's. The commissioners of the alms house reported in February 1795 that of 622 paupers in the institution, a total of 276, or 44 per cent, came from immigrant stock. Native New Yorkers singled out the Irish for special criticism, for this group composed a large and visible ingredient of the urban poor. In early 1796 some 148 of 770 alms house paupers were Irish-born.<sup>8</sup> "We shall be over-run with vagabonds," complained the editor of the New York *Minerva* in 1797; "we shall have the refuse of all the corrupt parts of society poured in upon our country."<sup>9</sup> In July 1801, the *New York Gazette* reported that 900 immigrants had entered the port during a four-week period, with thousands of others expected

<sup>3</sup> For population statistics on this period, see David T. GILCHRIST, ed., *The Growth of the Seaport Cities, 1790-1825* (Charlottesville, Va., 1967), 25-53, and George R. TAYLOR, "American Urban Growth Preceding the Railway Age," *Journal of Economic History*, XXVII (Sep. 1967), 309-339.

<sup>4</sup> *New York Independent Journal*, Feb. 18, 1784.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Feb. 11, 1784; James Duane to Common Council, Feb. 7, 1784, box 6, James Duane Papers, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>6</sup> James Duane to Rev. John H. Livingston, Feb. 12, 1784, *ibid.*; *New York Independent Journal*, Feb. 14, 1784; *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831* (21 vols., New York, 1917), I, 115 (hereafter cited as *M.C.C.*).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36, 48-49, 505; Richard Varick to James Duane, Dec. 31, 1788, box 7, Duane Papers.

<sup>8</sup> *M.C.C.*, II, 124-125, 212.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Minerva*, Sep. 5, 1797.

shortly. They were "incumbered with large families," wrote an observer, "without money, and without health and strength to enable them to earn even the most scanty subsistence." They were disease-ridden, lacked food and medicine, lived in hovels in the outer wards, and were "expiring from the want of sustenance."<sup>10</sup>

The crisis of poverty in the city deepened decade by decade. Natural disaster and man-made catastrophe contributed to this disturbing dimension of urban life. A series of yellow fever epidemics hit the metropolis between 1795 and 1805, placing new strains on New York's welfare program. During the epidemic of 1798 the city's health committee supported more than 2,400 destitute citizens; conditions worsened during the serious epidemics of 1803 and 1805.<sup>11</sup> Severe winter weather produced an annual emergency for the urban poor. During the winter of 1805, for instance, Mayor DeWitt Clinton feared for the survival of 10,000 impoverished, indigent New Yorkers and demanded legislative appropriations for relief.<sup>12</sup> Jefferson's Embargo brought new demands for municipal benevolence; the city responded with large distributions of food, fuel, cash, even employment.<sup>13</sup> Similar conditions prevailed at the end of the War of 1812. During 12 months after April 1814, public agencies assisted 19,078 needy persons — more than one-fifth of the city's population.<sup>14</sup> Investigators in February 1817 estimated at least 15,000 people totally dependent on public and private charity.<sup>15</sup> The magnitude of the problem is perhaps best revealed in municipal appropriations for poor relief, which annually topped all other items in the city budget.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *New-York Gazette*, July 2, 1801.

<sup>11</sup> *New York Daily Advertiser*, Nov. 3, 1798; James HARDIE, *An Account of the Malignant Fever Lately Prevalent in the City of New-York* (New York, 1799), 49-64; *New-York Evening Post*, Sep. 30, Oct. 26, 1803, Nov. 14, 1805; *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Sep. 16, 1805.

<sup>12</sup> DeWitt Clinton to Members of the Assembly from the City and County of New York, Jan. 23, 1805, microfilm reel 5, DeWitt Clinton Papers, Columbia University Library.

<sup>13</sup> *M.C.C.*, IV, 700-704, 719, V, 123-124, 364, 429-430, 471, 494-495; William Mooney to Common Council, Jan. 16, 1809, box 3172, City Clerk Documents, New York City Municipal Archives and Records Center; Report of Commissioners of the Alms House, Apr. 3, 1809, *ibid.*; George DAITSMAN, "Labor and the 'Welfare State' in Early New York," *Labor History*, IV (Fall 1963), 248-256.

<sup>14</sup> *M.C.C.*, VIII, 204.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Eddy to DeWitt Clinton, Feb. 15, 1817, reel 3, Clinton Papers; *New-York Evening Post*, Mar. 12, 1817.

<sup>16</sup> Edward D. DURAND, *The Finances of New York City* (New York, 1898), 30-31; Raymond A. MOHL, "Poverty, Public Relief, and Private Charity in New York City, 1784-1825" (doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1967), 118-120, appendix IV.

If public relief seemed excessive, the web of private benevolence saturated the city. The humanitarian spirit of the post-Revolutionary period stimulated formation of a bewildering variety of charities and relief organizations for every imaginable purpose: to aid orphans and widows, aged females and young prostitutes, immigrants, imprisoned debtors, and Negroes; to educate the children of the poor in charity schools, Sunday schools, and free schools; to promote religion and morality among the destitute; to supply medical care to the indigent; to create and provide employment for the poor; to reform juvenile delinquents and sinful seamen; to study the causes of poverty and pauperism. Nationality groups, trade and occupational organizations, mutual benefit societies, and patriotic, political, and fraternal groups also provided assistance to needy members. All told, more than 90 relief organizations of various kinds had been formed by 1825.<sup>17</sup> In addition, periods of special crisis — depression, disease, war, fire, severe winter — spawned *ad hoc* citizens committees for relief of the poor. One such group, during a three-week span in February 1817, distributed 103,312 quarts of soup to indigent New Yorkers.<sup>18</sup> These spontaneous committees supplemented organized charity and public relief in an important way. The best indication, therefore, of the extent of poverty in the urban community can be found in the massive public and private relief effort.

The poor composed an observable element in the urban community as well. Poverty-stricken immigrants, native-born unskilled laborers, and free Negroes, congregated most heavily in the northern wards of the city, especially the fifth, sixth, seventh, and tenth, where they lived in tenements, boardinghouses, cellars, and shanties. Reports of the superintendent of the alms house indicate that the greatest proportion of outdoor relief was distributed in these four wards. The "Five Points" area in the sixth ward eventually became one of the most notorious slums of nineteenth-century America. The streets adjacent to the waterfront, particularly South Street along the East River in the seventh ward, were "generally full of poor and dirty people." By 1830 Irish and German squatters populated "shanty towns" on the outskirts of the city above 40th Street.<sup>19</sup> In the winter of 1831, when soup houses

<sup>17</sup> For a listing of these groups, see *ibid.*, appendix V.

<sup>18</sup> *New-York Evening Post*, Feb. 17, 18, Mar. 10, 1817.

<sup>19</sup> *M.C.C.*, VII, 424, 742, VIII, 205; *New York Daily Advertiser*, Nov. 17, 1798; *New-York Evening Post*, Jan. 23, 1805; *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Jan. 9, 1809;

sprouted in every ward, one New Yorker wrote that "there is a great body of poor in the City, independent of those in the Alms House, a majority of whom appear to be Irish & Blacks, tho' there are many others."<sup>20</sup>

Although material exists which documents the incidence of poverty in New York City, considerably less evidence is available which would help in identifying the poor more clearly in terms of origin, occupation, and the causes of their poverty. The lower stratum of society in New York City was characterized by a "floating" population of transients and migrants which defies exact identification.<sup>21</sup> Many were immigrants passing in or out of the city; others were native Americans who drifted temporarily to the city from the neighboring countryside. Even within the urban community, the poor moved constantly from place to place. On three different days in January 1810, for example, the superintendent of the alms house listed Ann Haviland, a widow on outdoor relief, at three different addresses. Poor house records show that other relief recipients in New York City moved regularly too, although not as often, perhaps, as the Widow Haviland.<sup>22</sup>

Other considerations, as well, make it difficult to categorize those at the bottom of the social and economic scale. The publishers of the city directories, either by choice or by necessity, omitted a large number of people—mainly the poor—from their annual listings of city residents. One account book of cash distributions to the poor for January 1810 listed 295 families or individuals on outdoor relief. Of these, only 43, or 14.6 per cent, can be found in the city directory published in July 1810.<sup>23</sup> Under such circumstances, exact identification of the poor is a tenuous process at best.

Robert ERNST, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825-1863* (New York, 1949), 37-60; OSOFSKY, "The Enduring Ghetto," 243-255. See also James FORD, et al., *Slums and Housing* (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1936), I, 72-121.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Remsen, Jr. to Henry R. Remsen, Feb. 3, 1831, box 2, Henry Remsen Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>21</sup> See THERNSTROM, *Poverty and Progress*, 31, which identifies a similar "floating" and transient lower class in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

<sup>22</sup> Account Book of Cash Distributions to the Poor, 1809-1816, entries for Jan. 11, 20, 30, 1810, vol. 0383, Alms House Records, New York City Municipal Archives and Records Center.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, entries for Jan. 1810; David LONGWORTH, *Longworth's American Almanac, New-York Register, and City Directory, 1810* (New York, 1810).

One of the most serious problems in dealing with the history of the inarticulate is the obvious inadequacy of primary sources. Few day laborers, unskilled immigrants, free blacks, or alms house residents left diaries, letters, and other material comparable to that which records the activities and attitudes of the political, social, and economic leaders of the rising urban community. Thus, much of our knowledge of the poor comes from what others have said about them.

Another problem inherent in writing "history from the bottom up" is the difficulty of squaring contemporary attitudes with social realities. Most nineteenth-century New Yorkers made a distinction between poverty and pauperism. Current doctrines of political economy, largely derived from the writings of such economic liberals as Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, and Patrick Colquhoun, accepted poverty as the natural condition of the laboring classes. Few employers or reformers expected unskilled workingmen and immigrants to live much above a subsistence level. But pauperism meant dependence on public relief or private charity, an intolerable and unnecessary evil.<sup>24</sup>

Closely related to the differentiation between poverty and pauperism was the distinction New Yorkers made between the deserving and the undeserving poor. They recognized that for some paupers, public relief provided the only alternative to starvation and death. But they also assumed that most pauperism stemmed from individual shortcomings such as idleness, intemperance, impiety, improvidence, and ignorance. Thus, moralistic humanitarians and public officials often estimated that "undeserving" paupers comprised as much as seven-eighths or nine-tenths of the city's poor.<sup>25</sup> Few related poverty and pauperism to the social and economic conditions of the urban environment.

Such simplistic and inaccurate distinctions have merely obscured the extensiveness of real poverty in the urban community in the pre-industrial period. Despite these handicaps, however, it is possible to gather some relevant information about New York City's lower classes

<sup>24</sup> For a recent synthesis of attitudes and policies toward poverty, see Samuel MENCHER, *Poor Law to Poverty Program: Economic Security Policy in Britain and the United States* (Pittsburgh, 1967).

<sup>25</sup> *New-York Evening Post*, Mar. 12, 1817; SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF PAUPERISM, *Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism* (New York, 1818), 4-5.

and about the poor people who sought public assistance and private charity.

Helpless and destitute individuals composed an obviously large portion of the city's poor. These included infants and dependent children, the sick poor, the aged, and those with disabilities such as blindness and crippling injuries. Most institutionalized paupers fit into one of these categories. In 1795, for example, the commissioners of the alms house reported that the house was full of blind, lunatic, and aged paupers and many others "subject to Rheumatisms, Ulcers and Palsies and to Fits which impair their Reason and elude all the force of Medicine." In 1823 a special Common Council committee found only 46 able-bodied, healthy paupers (37 women and 9 men) among the 851 adult inmates. Other investigatory committees discovered few institutionalized dependents whose need was not real.<sup>26</sup>

Alms house records reveal many of the reasons for pauperism in New York. Not unusual was the case of John Sullivan, born blind in the poor house in 1759 and a resident of the institution until his death in 1819. The alms house census of 1813 listed another blind pauper, Susanna Wilson, aged 76, who first entered the house in 1761. The same census shows that numerous other blind, crippled, and infirm paupers of the pre-Revolutionary period remained public pensioners well into the early national period.<sup>27</sup> Other poor house residents included disabled Revolutionary War veterans admitted to the institution on condition that their government pensions be assigned to relief officials;<sup>28</sup> abandoned infants and bastard children, placed with wet nurses in the city and returned to the house at the age of 12 months;<sup>29</sup> and maniacs supported in special facilities in the alms house, in the New York Hospital, and, after 1821, in the newly constructed Bloomingdale Asylum.<sup>30</sup> Between

<sup>26</sup> *M.C.C.*, II, 125, V, 628-629, X, 466, XIII, 90-91; Cadwallader D. Colden to Charles G. Haines, Dec. 1, 1819, in *The Second Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, in the City of New-York* (New York, 1820), 64.

<sup>27</sup> Alms House Census, 1812-1813, 1819, vols. 160, 161, Alms House Records.

<sup>28</sup> *M.C.C.*, I, 184, 223; Minutes of the Commissioners of the Alms House and Bridewell, 1808-1829, entry for Mar. 10, 1821, vol. 0194, Alms House Records.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes of the Commissioners of the Alms House and Bridewell, 1791-1797, 185, 216, New York Public Library; Nursing Accounts, 1812-1829, vols. 085, 0123, 0160, 0161, 0382, Alms House Records.

<sup>30</sup> Minutes of the Commissioners of the Alms House, 1791-1797, 255; *M.C.C.*, I, 185, V, 216, 536, VIII, 559, IX, 142-143, 760, X, 7, 210, XI, 444, XIII, 435-436, XV, 49-50, 56; Thomas Eddy to Common Council, Feb. 27, 1809, box 3165, City Clerk Documents; *Address of the Governors of the New-York Hospital, to the Public* (New York, 1821).

1818 and 1826 indigent immigrants consistently numbered about one-third of the alms house paupers, another indication of the impact of immigration on the city's public welfare system.<sup>31</sup> The dependency of most of the institutionalized poor stemmed from real poverty and helplessness.

Much more numerous than the alms house paupers, the outdoor poor consisted of those assisted by public agencies within their own homes. The commissioners of the alms house made regular visits to indigent families throughout the city to investigate need and distribute firewood, provisions, grocery tickets, and cash. During periods of crisis, the commissioners established relief stations at the alms house and elsewhere to service those on burgeoning relief rolls.

The municipality often made special provisions for the outdoor poor as well, as indicated in the 1786 request of Jacob Abrams, an aged and sick petitioner: "Your Petitioner being a Jew cannot on account of his religious principles eat the victuals served out at the Poor House and humbly begs that some other provision may be made for him."<sup>32</sup> On numerous occasions the commissioners paid travel expenses for paupers or potential public charges who wished to leave the city. Welfare officials usually granted requests of this nature, "being willing," as they said in February 1792, "by Advancing a Smaller sum, to prevent the greater expense, of Supporting them here we know not how long."<sup>33</sup> However, if the case of Michael Thalamis was typical, one wonders about the extent of municipal savings. In 1811 the Common Council granted Thalamis, a destitute wanderer from Jerusalem, the sum of \$500 for a passage to Calcutta.<sup>34</sup>

A variety of causes stimulated dependency among the outdoor poor. Many were widows with children, or wives and families abandoned by husbands and fathers. During periods of depression and unemployment men often sought work in other cities and other states, leaving families as municipal burdens. The vicissitudes of maritime employment affected

<sup>31</sup> *M.C.C.*, IX, 609, X, 398, XI, 154, 414, XIII, 84, 739, XIV, 414.

<sup>32</sup> Petition of Jacob Abrahams, Jan. 17, 1786, Petitions, 1784-1787, City Clerk Documents.

<sup>33</sup> Minutes of the Commissioners of the Alms House, 1791-1797, 7, 19, 40, 46-47, 55, 76, 98, 100, 194, 198-199, 214, 233; Minutes of the Commissioners of the Alms House, 1808-1829, entry for Mar. 16, 1808, vol. 0194, Alms House Records.

<sup>34</sup> *M.C.C.*, VI, 578-579, 585, 652, 666.



the families of seamen. Other families became pauperized when breadwinners suffered illness or disabling injury, received jail terms for debt or crime, and enlisted in army or militia. The influx of immigrants in the post-Revolutionary period added to the municipal relief burden and many sick and infirm immigrants became public charges immediately on arrival.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, most of the city's charitable associations and mutual benefit societies confined assistance to cases of unavoidable indigence. During the early years of the nineteenth century the French Benevolent Society annually aided 250 to 300 indigent French families. In 1814 the Female Assistance Society relieved more than 1,500 women, while the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged, Indigent Females provided for another 150 above the age of 60. In 1816 the Humane Society supported 1,120 imprisoned debtors. Some 254 widows and 667 children under the age of ten comprised the pension list of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows in November 1821. During 1824 the City Dispensary treated 7,635 indigent patients and vaccinated 6,080 others. On January 1, 1826, the Orphan Society maintained 159 children in its asylum.<sup>36</sup> Clearly, helpless dependents formed a substantial portion of New York City's poor.

The laboring poor composed a second important category of indigent New Yorkers. The city was full of able-bodied men and women with low-paying jobs or without regular employment. These included indentured servants, free blacks, apprentices, seamstresses, washwomen, and domestic workers. Similarly, the work of seamen was noncontinuous in character. The largest group consisted of unskilled common laborers—cartmen, scavengers, chimney sweeps, wood cutters, stevedores, and

<sup>35</sup> Philip Arcularius to Common Council, Oct. 30, 1805, box 3155, City Clerk Documents; *New-York Evening Post*, Oct. 2, 1812, Feb. 22, 1814; and New York Asylum for Lying-in Women, Minutes of the Visiting Committee, 1823-1831, New-York Historical Society, which gives background on several women whose husbands had left New York City in search of employment. Innumerable examples of helpless individuals and families on outdoor relief or assisted by charity may be found in Minutes of the Commissioners of the Alms House, 1791-1797; Account Book of Cash Distributions to the Poor, 1809-1816, vol. 0383, Alms House Records; Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, Minute Books, 1797-1932, New-York Historical Society; and Humane Society of the City of New York, Reports of the Visiting Committee, 1805-1815, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>36</sup> Petition of the French Benevolent Society, Feb. 25, 1811, box 3149, City Clerk Documents; *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Nov. 19, Dec. 2, 1814, Jan. 19, 1826; *New-York Evening Post*, Feb. 18, 1817, Jan. 26, 1825; Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, Minute Books, 1797-1932, entry for Nov. 15, 1821.

dock workers — men and boys who sought new jobs each day. Others dug foundations in summer and shoveled snow in winter. The steadily increasing flow of immigrants to New York City swelled the labor market and depressed the wage level for these unskilled workers.

The irregular nature of employment available to unskilled workers dictated that they would always “dwell on the borders of poverty.” The first annual report of the Society for the Relief of Distressed Debtors in 1788 acknowledged the needs of many urban workers “whose incessant application to labor, will not enable them to subsist themselves, and their families, and at the same time, secure a small provision for their support during a temporary failure of supplies.”<sup>37</sup> These families sought relief from public and private agencies in the absence of employment.

The seasonal character of employment for most common laborers accounts for the large increase in relief expenditures during winter months. Most affected by winter weather were day laborers, cartmen, small tradesmen, fishermen, oystermen, and others who worked out of doors. The virtual suspension of commerce and shipping also brought seasonal unemployment to laborers and craftsmen whose livelihood depended on a bustling harbor — dock workers, bargemen, river boatmen, ship carpenters, caulkers, and riggers. Similarly, building tradesmen (masons, carpenters, plasterers, bricklayers) and their laborers remained inactive during cold weather.<sup>38</sup>

Depression and epidemic disrupted employment patterns and forced day laborers onto the relief rolls. During the Embargo crisis “thousands of mariners, mechanics, and laborers” — men who had subsisted by daily labor — could be seen “ranging the streets in search of employment, destitute of cloathing, food and a lodging.”<sup>39</sup> Similar conditions accompanied the depression years after 1815, when unemployment affected “all the labouring classes.”<sup>40</sup> When yellow fever and cholera epidemics

<sup>37</sup> *New York Daily Advertiser*, Jan. 31, 1788, Jan. 13, 1791; *New York Morning Chronicle*, Oct. 14, 1802.

<sup>38</sup> *New York Daily Advertiser*, Jan. 13, 1791; *New-York Evening Post*, Oct. 12, 1804, Dec. 9, 1817; *New York Republican Watch-Tower*, Jan. 23, 1805; *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Aug. 19, 1817.

<sup>39</sup> *New York American Citizen*, Jan. 1, 1808; *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Jan. 6, 1808; *New York Daily Advertiser*, Dec. 9, 1808; *New-York Evening Post*, Jan. 21, 1809.

<sup>40</sup> Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, *Minute Books*, 1797-1932, entry for Nov. 16, 1820; *Niles' Weekly Register*, Aug. 7, 1819, Sep. 6, 1823. See also Samuel REZNECK,

devastated the metropolis, all business ceased; wealthy and middle class residents abandoned the city by the thousands and left laborers and the poor to fend for themselves or succumb to disease.<sup>41</sup>

Those in temporary distress usually received outdoor relief in the form of cash, food, and firewood, but occasionally, as in the Embargo crisis, the municipality supplied work relief as well. While most New Yorkers moralized about the poor, several discerning public officials recognized that only steady and profitable employment would permanently improve the condition of poor laborers. For example, in 1803, Mayor Edward Livingston proposed municipal workshops where unskilled men might be trained in useful crafts and trades. Unfortunately, the scheme aroused the ire of the city's skilled mechanics, who feared cheap competition and successfully opposed the mayor's reform.<sup>42</sup>

Similar work relief plans failed in later years, despite support from leading humanitarians. In 1823 Mayor Stephen Allen explained these failures:

The remedy which has most often been insisted on as a preventive, is the supplying of the poor with such description of labor as their talents and abilities will permit them to perform. This, if it could be effected, would no doubt tend to reduce the number of applicants for public bounty. But the chief difficulty lies, in furnishing suitable labor for this description of persons, as those who apply for or require assistance, are principally such as have no mechanical profession, and consequently they are unable to perform any thing except the ordinary avocations of a laborer.<sup>43</sup>

Under such conditions and without facilities for training these unskilled laborers, municipal officials and charity reformers made little progress in improving the condition of poor workingmen.

A third general category of petitioners for public charity consisted of the "undeserving poor." Editors and correspondents filled the columns of the city's newspapers with complaints about throngs of beggars,

"The Depression of 1819-1822, A Social History," *American Historical Review*, XXXIX (Oct. 1933), 28-47.

<sup>41</sup> *New York Daily Advertiser*, Aug. 25, 1803; James HARDIE, *An Account of the Malignant Fever Which Prevalled in the City of New-York, during the Autumn of 1805* (New York, 1805), 104; John DUFFY, *A History of Public Health in New York City, 1625-1866* (New York, 1968), 101-123, 440-460; and Charles E. ROSENBERG, *The Cholera Years* (Chicago, 1962).

<sup>42</sup> See Raymond A. MOHL, "Poverty, Politics, and the Mechanics of New York City, 1803," *Labor History*, forthcoming.

<sup>43</sup> *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York*, 47 sess. (1824), II, appendix B, 44.

peddlers, prostitutes, intemperate idlers, and others who could give "no correct account of themselves" and lived on the benevolence of the community. The vagrancy problem of the late eighteenth century continued into the nineteenth. "Humanitas" complained in the *Commercial Advertiser* in 1809 "that notwithstanding much has been done to meliorate the condition of the poor, a large number of vagrants are suffered to wander about our streets, many of them in a state of drunkenness . . . and in the practice of every vice." In 1821 the Common Council, convinced that "many persons spend the summer season in idleness and the winter in the Alms House," proposed a mandatory work program as a deterrent to public assistance.<sup>44</sup>

Periodically, the marshals rounded up vagrants, beggars, and prostitutes for 60-day terms in Bridewell or, for those lacking legal settlement, transportation from the city. Alms house records reveal the difficulty of permanently removing such dependents. Within the space of six months in 1809-1810, for example, the marshals removed alleged prostitute Betsy Hancock and her two daughters aged 14 and 18 to Connecticut four times. Another woman, Patience Ames, was removed to Philadelphia in June 1809, for the third time.<sup>45</sup> Constant additions to New York's population by European immigration and internal migration made enforcement of residency provisions of the poor laws an impossible task.

Despite local ordinances against vagrancy and begging, poverty-stricken New Yorkers went from door to door in search of food and alms and sent their children to peddle and beg in the streets.<sup>46</sup> The *Commercial Advertiser* reported in 1812 that a Negro beggar, "well known in Broadway," had exacted more than \$50 from "the charitable credulity of the Public" in a few days before being arrested by the city marshals.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Nov. 28, 1809; *M.C.C.*, XII, 158.

<sup>45</sup> *New-York Evening Post*, June 8, 1804; *M.C.C.*, I, 35-36, 48-49, 59, IV, 1-2; Monthly Calendar of Persons Confined in City Prison and Bridewell, 1819-1820, boxes 3165, 3176, City Clerk Documents; Register of Persons Transported or Removed, 1808-1811, vol. 089, Alms House Records.

<sup>46</sup> *New York Daily Advertiser*, Feb. 22, 1786, Sep. 6, 1798, Sep. 4, 1799; *New-York Evening Post*, June 8, 1804, July 30, 1807, Jan. 13, 1809; Oct. 24, 1814; *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Nov. 28, 1809, Oct. 6, 1812; *New York Columbian*, Dec. 16, 1819; Presentment of Grand Jury of the Court of General Sessions, Mar. 12, 1824, box 3152, City Clerk Documents; Rev. John Stanford to Mayor and Common Council, Jan. 21, 1812, Rev. John Stanford Manuscripts, New-York Historical Society; John STANFORD, *Discourse on Opening the New Building of the House of Refuge, New-York, Established for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents* (New York, 1826).

<sup>47</sup> *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Oct. 6, 1812.

One professional beggar, Peter Lial, petitioned the Common Council in 1815 for a license to practice his trade without interference from the constabulary:

The petition of Peter Lial of the City of New York setting forth that he has a wife and two children which he is under the necessity of Supporting by his present practice of asking Charity of the Public and which he has done for nineteen years — that he has always conducted himself in a Sober and orderly manner and therefore begs of your honorable Body that you will so far grant him the Privilege of continuing the practice that he may still be enabled to support his family.<sup>48</sup>

The Council asked Lial to withdraw his petition.

Besides beggars and vagrants, the “undeserving” poor included farmers and agricultural laborers from neighboring counties, allegedly “too lazy to work for a living in the country,” who migrated to the city each winter to collect relief payments.<sup>49</sup> Some took advantage of lax municipal welfare administration and, without permission or examination, entered the alms house to partake of the city’s bounty. “It was always the case,” asserted alms house clerk Josiah Shippey, J., in 1808; “they will get in and they will get out, and it is impossible to be otherwise, untill there are better inclosures, better watches at the gate.”<sup>50</sup> Others, such as ferry boatman John Armstrong, imposed on the public in a different way. In 1796 Armstrong’s wife and three children entered the alms house, while he “pretended inability and complained of a lame leg, which however did not prevent him from following his business... [and] spending his money idly.”<sup>51</sup> These, then, were some of the “unworthy” poor, whose visibility and alleged proportions shaped the humanitarian response to urban manifestations of poverty.

Contemporary humanitarians and welfare officials reacted to urban poverty with a fervent moralism. They mistakenly identified the symptoms of poverty — intemperance, immorality, impiety, idleness, ignorance, mendicity — as causes and embarked upon a campaign to purge the poor of their vices. The widely accepted cures for dependency included education, liquor reforms, Bible and tract distribution, “free” churches

<sup>48</sup> Petition of Peter Lial, July 17, 1815, box 3175, City Clerk Documents.

<sup>49</sup> *New-York Evening Post*, Feb. 11, 1805, Jan. 23, 1821; *Second Annual Report of Society for the Prevention of Pauperism*, 25; *The Fourth Annual Report of the Managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, in the City of New-York* (New York, 1821), 29.

<sup>50</sup> Deposition of Josiah Shippey, Jr., June 24, 1808, box 3172, City Clerk Documents.

<sup>51</sup> Minutes of the Commissioners of the Alms House, 1791-1797, 229.

in the slums, Sunday schools, restrictions on outdoor relief, coordinated charity efforts to prevent "misapplications" and "impositions," and punitive work programs.

Such proposals reflected the changing nature of humanitarianism. In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment rationalism and the spirit of Christian charity inspired benevolent activity. Christians had an obligation to aid the poor, the Humane Society asserted in its 1788 report.<sup>52</sup> In a 1791 charity sermon, the Reverend John Rodgers suggested that God "appointed" the rich as "Almoners" to distribute their abundance to the poor.<sup>53</sup> "The precepts of our holy religion," the Assistance Society affirmed in 1809, made it "the duty of the rich and those who are in comfortable circumstances, to provide for the relief of the suffering poor."<sup>54</sup> The Enlightenment tradition similarly demanded benevolence, but as a human rather than a religious duty. DeWitt Clinton drew upon such ideas in a 1793 oration: "How glorious, how God-like, to step forth to the relief of . . . distress; to arrest the tear of sorrow; to disarm affliction of its darts; to smooth the pillow of declining age; to rescue from the fangs of vice the helpless infant, and to diffuse the most lively joys over a whole family of rational creatures."<sup>55</sup> The "voice of common humanity" or the "obligations of the social compact" dictated assistance to the needy.<sup>56</sup>

But by the second decade of the nineteenth century, moralism had replaced benevolence as a humanitarian energizer. "Vice, ignorance, and improvidence are the general and constantly operating causes of poverty," observed visiting Presbyterian preacher John H. Rice in 1824.<sup>57</sup> New Yorkers echoed these views. Episcopal Bishop John H. Hobart, for example, clearly expressed the moralistic rationale in a sermon for the Orphan Asylum Society in 1820: "Poverty and distress are the result and punishment of indolence, or censurable improvidence, if not of

<sup>52</sup> *New York Daily Advertiser*, Jan. 30, 1788.

<sup>53</sup> John Rodgers, Sermon for the Presbyterian Charity School, Nov. 6, 1791, Manuscript Sermons, 1775-1806, Rev. John Rodgers Papers, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>54</sup> *New-York Evening Post*, Jan. 5, 1810.

<sup>55</sup> De Witt CLINTON, *An Address, Delivered before Holland Lodge, December 24, 1793* (New York, 1859), 15.

<sup>56</sup> *New-York Evening Post*, Jan. 15, 1805, Jan. 5, 1810.

<sup>57</sup> John H. RICE, *Charity at Home: A Sermon, Preached for the Benefit of the United Domestic Missionary Society* (New York, 1824), 15. See also Benjamin J. KLEBANER, "Poverty and Its Relief in American Thought, 1815-61," *Social Service Review*, XXXVIII (Dec. 1964), 382-399.

vice and crimes."<sup>58</sup> In 1824 Mayor Stephen Allen described alcoholism as "the foundation upon which the pauperism of this country is based."<sup>59</sup> According to the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, urban poverty had two principal stimulants: "Intemperance among the Men, and the love of dress among the Women."<sup>60</sup> In 1821 the Common Council labeled "a reluctance to labor" the reason for "a great portion" of pauperism.<sup>61</sup> "Almost all the sufferings of the poor in this, and other cities," urban missionary Ward Stafford wrote in 1817, "are the immediate effect of ignorance or vice."<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, public assistance and private charity tended to reward such impious, intemperate, and improper behavior. The fear of suffering was "a wholesome moral discipline" which forced the poor to work and save, but the certainty of relief in time of need tended to "dispel the horrors of poverty."<sup>63</sup>

Based upon these assumptions, solutions for economic dependency increasingly became schemes for moral improvement. If the poor became that way because of individual shortcomings and immoral character, Stafford wrote, "let there be a great effort to change the moral character of mankind, to remove the cause of their sufferings."<sup>64</sup> The conviction that the poor brought poverty upon themselves implied that moral reform would cure dependency more effectively than charity and relief. Accepting lower-class vices as the cause of pauperism, the moral reformers of New York again and again asserted the need for calling opposing virtues into play. The character of the poor could be improved and dependency eliminated, said the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in 1819, only "by inculcating religion, morality, sobriety, and industry, and by diffusing useful knowledge among the indigent and laboring people."<sup>65</sup> Moral and religious exhortation naturally

<sup>58</sup> John H. HOBART, *The Claims of the Orphan* (New York, 1820), 7.

<sup>59</sup> *Assembly Journal*, 47 sess. (1824), II, appendix B, 44.

<sup>60</sup> Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, Minute Books, 1797-1932, entry for Nov. 21, 1822.

<sup>61</sup> *M.C.C.*, XII, 158.

<sup>62</sup> Ward STAFFORD, *New Missionary Field: A Report to the Female Missionary Society for the Poor of the City of New-York, and Its Vicinity* (New York, 1817), 41.

<sup>63</sup> William O. BOURNE, *History of the Public School Society of the City of New York* (New York, 1870), 90; *New York Christian Herald*, IV (Nov. 29, 1817), 145.

<sup>64</sup> STAFFORD, *New Missionary Field*, 44.

<sup>65</sup> SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF PAUPERISM, *Documents Relative to Savings Banks, Intemperance, and Lotteries* (New York, 1819), 21. See also Raymond A. MOWL, "Humanitarianism in the Preindustrial City: The New York Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, 1817-1823," *Journal of American History*, LVII (Dec. 1970), 576-599.

accompanied the relief doled out by public officials and benevolent societies. Charity schools, free schools, Sunday schools, Bible and tract societies, city missionary associations, temperance groups, and numerous other urban organizations sought to cleanse the poor of their sins and vices, bring moral uplift to the slums, and end poverty with virtue and religion.

Simultaneously, the moral crusade became a means of imposing social control upon an increasingly large and seemingly disorderly segment of the urban population. Social and economic change in the early national period destroyed the stable, well-ordered, deferential society of the eighteenth century. The informal institutions which had maintained order in the colonial period — church, family, faction, and leadership of neighborhood, business, and government — held little meaning for New York's growing population of native and foreign newcomers. In the hard struggle for existence, virtue seemed to have little relevance. For middle class urbanites, pauperism and dependency came to typify all that was wrong with the city. Acting on their fears, responding to social change, urban reformers and civic leaders replaced the informal controls of colonial years with the network of benevolent institutions.

The concern for social control permeated most humanitarian societies, and the Common Council as well. Education for the poor, for instance, was thought of primarily as a means of creating a moral, docile, and law-abiding lower class. The African Free School aimed to make Blacks "safe and useful members of society" and "quiet and orderly citizens."<sup>66</sup> The Free School Society attempted to disseminate "fixed habits of industry, decency, and order."<sup>67</sup> Sunday schools sought to make the poor contented with their "station" in life. "Are you friends to *social order*," asked a writer in *The Evangelical Guardian* in 1818? "Engage in Sunday schools that you may be instrumental in teaching the rising generation how to preserve that order."<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> *New York Daily Advertiser*, Oct. 27, 1789; Charles C. ANDREWS, *The History of the New-York African Free Schools* (New York, 1830), 47.

<sup>67</sup> BOURNE, *Public School Society*, 7.

<sup>68</sup> *New York Evangelical Guardian*, I (Feb. 1818), 458. See also Raymond A. MOHL, "Education as Social Control in New York City, 1784-1825," *New York History*, LI (April 1970), 219-237.



The desire for urban order prompted other organized efforts as well. The Common Council supported an alms house preacher because religion was "highly beneficial not only to the morals, but to the industry of the Lower Classes of the Community."<sup>69</sup> When the New-York Bible Society in 1820 asked why the city, its streets, courts, and public institutions overflowed with vicious and dissolute criminals, beggars, and paupers, the answer seemed logical — "it is because Bibles are not sufficiently distributed among them."<sup>70</sup> Bible reading made men virtuous and useful, sober and industrious; it stimulated "steady habits and correct moral deportment"; it produced "admirers of social order" and strengthened "the fabric of civil society."<sup>71</sup> A religious tract in every home, said the Reverend Alexander McClelland in 1817, was the surest guardian against "vice, anarchy, and violence."<sup>72</sup> Free churches in the slums, mostly sponsored by urban missionary societies, aimed at the conversion of New York's estimated 50,000 "heathens." The preservation of the Sabbath, wrote the Reverend Gardiner Spring, was "one of the most efficient expedients for the prevention of pauperism."<sup>73</sup> Temperance advocates argued with conviction that drinking undermined morality and thus destroyed a main prop of the social order. Others promoted work programs for the poor, either as a deterrent to relief, as a means of building character, or "to inure them to Labour."<sup>74</sup> Humanitarian and municipal leaders turned to moral reform as a means of social control. The misconceptions of the moral reformers, of course, diverted attention from real social and economic inequities and, by ignoring the economic deprivation of the poor, simply perpetuated the conditions they wished to eliminate.

The existence of widespread poverty and economic dependency in the preindustrial American city has long been overlooked or ignored by

<sup>69</sup> Report of Committee of Charity on Petition of the Trustees of the African Church, Dec. 8, 1817, box 3175, City Clerk Documents.

<sup>70</sup> *The First Report of the New-York Bible Society* (New York, 1820), 16.

<sup>71</sup> *The Third Annual Report of the Managers of the Marine Bible Society of New-York* (New York, 1819), 8; *Tenth Annual Report of the New-York Female Auxiliary Bible Society* (New York, 1826), 14; *New York Christian Herald*, IX (April 5, 1823), 690.

<sup>72</sup> *The Fifth Annual Report of the New-York Religious Tract Society* (New York, 1817), 45, 47.

<sup>73</sup> Gardiner SPRING, *An Appeal to the Citizens of New-York, in Behalf of the Christian Sabbath* (New York, 1823), 16. See also Clifford S. GRIFFIN, "Religious Benevolence as Social Control, 1815-1860," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIV (Dec. 1957), 423-444.

<sup>74</sup> *Ordinances, Rules and Bye-Laws, for the Government of the Alms-House, and House of Employment, of the City of New-York*, June 16, 1784, broadside in New-York Historical Society.

historians. Between 1790 and 1830 New York City's population increased by 548.9% and the physical dimensions of the metropolis expanded on a similar scale.<sup>75</sup> Rapid urbanization and the beginnings of industrialization produced new forms of economic complexity and interdependence, which in turn brought business fluctuations, depressions, unemployment, and low wages. These economic conditions, combined with factors such as disease and age, epidemic and war, brought an intensification of poverty and pauperism. The idea of early America as a land of opportunity deserves serious reconsideration, for, then as now, poverty seemed a natural concomitant of urbanism and urbanization.

<sup>75</sup> GILCHRIST, ed., *Growth of the Seaport Cities*, 44.