

The Nineteenth-Century Almshouse System in Saint John County

by James M. WHALEN *

The New Brunswick Poor Law of the nineteenth century owes its origins mainly to British precedents adopted by the New England colonists and transferred to the province by the Loyalists. It contained the ancient English principle of compulsory assessment on the residents of each parish for relief of their own poor. For the purpose of providing a place for paupers unable to earn a living, the Overseers of the Poor, with the approval of the General Sessions of the Peace, were authorized "to hire or purchase a house, for the reception of such Poor, and to purchase materials, to employ such of them as are able to labour..."¹ This provision led to the establishment of various almshouses and workhouses in New Brunswick.

The almshouse was established as a public institution, maintained by various county, city or parish units, for public dependents. While the workhouse, an adjunct to the almshouse, provided a place where the unemployed poor could labour in accordance with their work ability. Disorderly or idle persons, it was thought, could be educated to support themselves through supervised daily work in and about this institution.

In New Brunswick, as elsewhere, the utility of the almshouse system was, for the most part, argued from an economic point of view. In areas of the province where the almshouse system was adopted, it was generally agreed that institutional care was not only a more economical way to provide for the poor but a more humane method as well. Due to fear of increased taxation, however, the residents of several parishes of the province were not easily convinced of the merits of the almshouse system. Hence, institutional care for the poor was slow in coming to New Brunswick.

The New Brunswick Poor Law provided an alternative for areas in which it was impossible to adopt the almshouse system. That is, Overseers

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¹ 26 George III, c.43 (1786). Statutes quoted are New Brunswick Statutes unless otherwise stated.

of the Poor were permitted to make agreements with suitable persons residing in a particular parish to take paupers into their homes on an annual allowance from the parish funds and at the least expense to the taxpayers. The party taking charge of a pauper was entitled to employ him at any work which he was judged capable of doing. The Overseers were to act with "impartiality . . . having at the same time a regard, to the character of the person who offers, so the Poor may not be inhumanely treated, nor the public abused".² The practice of contracting the keep of the poor on an annual basis appears to have been common in New England before the adoption of the almshouse system³ and was customary in sparsely settled parishes of New Brunswick throughout the nineteenth century. It continued into the present century in several counties of the province where almshouses were non-existent. Needless to say, it was a system which was open to grave abuses because it was impossible for Overseers to keep a constant vigil over persons to whom the poor were discharged.

The adoption of institutional care for paupers in the nineteenth century, as opposed to boarding them in private homes under the contract system, was generally common in the more heavily populated areas of the province. This arose from the fact that these areas usually had large numbers of destitutes. Consequently, local authorities found it not only more convenient but more economical to provide a central building for their reception. It was logical, therefore, that the City of Saint John, which was the focal point of the province from its inception in 1784, established the first almshouse in New Brunswick. This institution, located on the lot where the Admiral Beatty Hotel stands today, was formerly a great windmill but was purchased by the City in 1800 and converted into a poorhouse.⁴ The City was granted the authority to establish an almshouse under its Charter of Incorporation of 1785. The poor of Saint John were housed in this building until January 1819 when it was destroyed by fire.⁵ Soon after this disaster a new almshouse, located on the corner of Car-

² *Ibid.*

³ Robert KELSO, *The History of Public Poor Relief In Massachusetts*, Boston, 1922, pp. 107-111, and Carl BRIDENBAUGH, *Cities in the Wilderness*, New York, 1960, pp. 232-238.

⁴ N.B. Historical Society Collection, Vol. 1, Joseph W. Lawrence's paper entitled *The Medical Men of Saint John in the First Half Century*.

⁵ *Royal Gazette* (Fredericton), Jan. 19, 1819.

marthen and King Street East, accommodated the City's poor until 1843, except for a few months in 1829 when fire damaged the institution.⁶

The agitation for a city and county almshouse, workhouse and infirmary arose gradually. Due to the great influx of depressed immigrants to Saint John in the 1830's, the number of paupers increased accordingly. Since Saint John City was the major port and industrial centre of the province, it had a disproportionate number of paupers. Its residents were heavily burdened by poor taxes and the City Almshouse was crowded. In order to relieve this situation, a large city and county almshouse was needed. It was felt that, by having parishes surrounding the City pay their share for the support of paupers in such an institution, the City poor taxes would be reduced.

In a letter of 1836, sent to the Overseers of the Poor for the City of Saint John, Dr. Peters, the medical attendant to the City Almshouse, pointed out that this institution only housed sixty inmates comfortably, yet there were sometimes over one hundred and forty in it. In order to relieve this situation a number of sick inmates were removed to a former cholera hospital. Since this building was also being used as a lunatic asylum, it was not only overcrowded but entirely unsuitable for almshouse purposes.⁷ The Grand Jury⁸ also was vitally concerned over the lack of accommodations for paupers in the Saint John area.

Their inspection of those places (The Poorhouse and the Temporary Lunatic Asylum and Infirmary), however, has entirely convinced the Grand Jury (independently of their anxious desire to witness a reduction of the present enormous poor rates) of the propriety and necessity of providing additional accommodations for the inmates of these public institutions. At present it appears that there are from 180 to 190 individuals in the poorhouse establishment among whom many are sick. It must be exceedingly dangerous both to their and the public health, to crowd the sick and the healthy in the same building: while it appears equally improper to confine lunatics in the same house with some fever patients and other sick persons.⁹

⁶ N.B. *Courier* (Saint John), Mar. 7, 1829.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Dec. 24, 1836.

⁸ The Grand Jury was the popular element of local government within the Quarter Sessions. The members of the Jury were chosen periodically in each county from among persons resident in a community for at least three months and who owned freehold in the county of the annual value of £10 or personal property of the value of £100 or more. The Jury in its advisory capacity made presentments of grievances to the Justices in Quarter Sessions but as they had no actual power the Justices did not have to act on their presentments (see H. J. WHALEN, *The Development of Local Government in New Brunswick*, p. 14).

⁹ N.B. Provincial Archives, Fredericton, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. E, Sept. 8, 1837.

The Jury expressed their agreement with an earlier suggestion of the City Recorder, that a new almshouse be erected on a farm site and that the present City Poorhouse be used as an infirmary. The Jury stated that under this scheme paupers could be employed on the almshouse farm rather than spend their time in idleness as was the case. Also, the Jury believed the poor taxes would be reduced in the City because they would be more justly distributed over the whole County. Besides, the health of the inmates would improve as the sick would be housed in a separate building.¹⁰

A committee appointed to recommend a plan to reduce the poor taxes in the City of Saint John tabled their report in 1837. They came to the conclusion that Saint John County should adopt legislation based on the York County Almshouse Act of 1822.¹¹

... That the system provided in the County of York is the most beneficial and that we have accordingly framed a Bill and Petition in a great manner founded on the Act authorizing that system which we recommend should be laid before the Legislature at its approaching Session 14 December 1837.¹²

Approval of the committee's action was granted by the General Sessions and in March 1838 the legislature passed an act providing for the erection of an almshouse, workhouse and infirmary for the City and County of Saint John. The preamble to this act points out that the York County almshouse system "has been found by experience to be less expensive than the general system pursued throughout the Province and to be productive of industrious, sober and moral habits among that class of people..."¹³ The merits of the York County almshouse system were particularly noticeable in the Parish of Fredericton which had seen a "removal of every beggar from the streets, and the reduction of the poor rate within four years from £1000 to £350 per annum, an example worthy of imitation".¹⁴

By the Almshouse Act of 1838, the Justices of Saint John City and County were authorized to purchase land and erect an almshouse and workhouse for paupers of the Parishes of Lancaster, Portland and Saint

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ 3 George IV, c.25 (1822).

¹² N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. E, Dec. 16, 1837.

¹³ 1 Victoria, c.17 (1838).

¹⁴ *Royal Gazette* (Fredericton), Oct. 24, 1826.

Martin's and the City of Saint John whose residents were assessed to pay for it. The almshouse system was extended to Simonds and Musquash when they became parishes in 1839 and 1877 respectively. It appears that Saint Martin's was the only parish opposed to the adoption of the Act of 1838. In 1840 the inhabitants of that parish unsuccessfully petitioned the legislature to relieve them of the responsibilities of the Almshouse Act.¹⁵ Probably, the residents of Saint Martin's objected to the sudden increase in their poor rates necessitated by the establishment of a pauper institution.

In 1838 a committee was appointed by the Sessions to choose a site and suggest plans for the proposed almshouse.¹⁶ Over a year later, they presented plans to the Sessions and recommended that tenders be called. The Sessions responded by ordering "that the same be received and that the same committee advertise for tenders ... [and] ... be authorized to fix upon some suitable site on the House of Correction Lot for the said Almshouse ..."¹⁷ In 1839 tenders were called for the construction of the almshouse in Simonds Parish,¹⁸ but none was received. The committee explained that "no doubt some tenders would have been given in but the late fire taking place the Saturday before they were to have been handed in prevented many from so doing ..."¹⁹ Due to the great demand for workmen and construction materials following the fire, a new committee, appointed by the Sessions, decided to postpone the project until a more appropriate time.²⁰ Not until June 1841 did this committee report that they had received tenders for the construction of the almshouse. The Sessions awarded the contract to Ewen Cameron and Edward Roche for £3,330.²¹ By the autumn of 1842 the building was nearing completion so the Sessions appointed a committee to examine the new premises. They reported "that the contract has been fulfilled in a faithful manner and to our satisfaction".²² Despite this favorable report a rapid deterioration of the structure occurred as was pointed out by the Grand Jury in 1843.

¹⁵ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. F, Feb. 19, 1840.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk. E, Mar. 26, 1838.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Bk. F, June 11, 1839.

¹⁸ N.B. *Courier* (Saint John), Aug. 3, 1839.

¹⁹ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. F, Sept. 9, 1839.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Bk. F, Oct. 31, 1840.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Bk. G, June 12, 1841.

²² *Ibid.*, Bk. G, Sept. 17, 1842.

...the Jury do lament that so large a sum of money should have been expended on a building so unfit for the purposes for which it was intended; and the Jury are surprised that the building should have been taken off the hands of the contractor finished in so unworkmanlike manner as it appears some of the walls, doors and floors are already requiring repairs.²³

By 1845 an additional £1,170 was spent for extensions and repairs to the building.²⁴

The new almshouse was administered by a board of commissioners who were appointed to superintend and manage the institution. However, they delegated most of their responsibility to the keeper and matron who actually ran the establishment subject to the commissioners' control. In order for the commissioners to supervise the institution effectively, they took turns in making weekly inspections of the premises and at the end of each month they made a group inspection. The first board, consisting of six commissioners, which came to office in 1843,²⁵ replaced the Overseers of the poor who for years were appointed in each parish to look after paupers. One of the final duties of the Overseers was to transfer the money remaining in their hands to the commissioners.²⁶

It appears that paupers were first received into the new building on April 21, 1843.²⁷ The majority of them were transferred from the former City Almshouse²⁸ which was to be converted into the City and County Infirmary under the Almshouse Act of 1838.²⁹

After the almshouse was established, the employment of the inmates became an important aim of the board of commissioners. The Almshouse Act of 1838 authorized commissioners to engage those inmates who were capable in some type of employment.³⁰ The commissioners delegated the enforcement of this responsibility to the keeper and matron. The only paupers excused from work were those pronounced incapable by the

²³ *Ibid.*, Bk. H, June 17, 1843.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Bk. H, Mar. 20, 1845.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Bk. G, Apr. 1, 1843.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk. H, Aug. 22, 1843.

²⁷ N.B. Museum, Saint John, Record Book of the Saint John County Almshouse and Workhouse, 1843-1849.

²⁸ It appears that the City Almshouse was not the only establishment of its kind in Saint John City and County before 1843. There are a few references made to a poorhouse located in the Parish of Portland which was operated under the direction of the Overseers of the Poor for that parish beginning in 1837 and continuing at least until 1843. This building was sold in December 1844 (see N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. H, Sept. 10, 1844 and Dec. 20, 1844).

²⁹ 1 Victoria, c.17 (1838).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

almshouse physician. Paupers who performed their work "cheerfully and faithfully" were rewarded,³¹ probably with extra food rations or free time.

Some of the rules for the institution give an indication of the type of indoor work at which the inmates were employed. The rooms and hallways had to be cleaned every day and scrubbed at least once a week. Every week assistance was needed with the laundry. Probably, the inmates aided the cook by helping to prepare and serve meals as well as clean the utensils and premises after they were finished.³² Beyond this, the inmates were kept busy at other indoor jobs because "all the stockings required for their own use were made there, they spun and sewed, whenever there was a tailor or shoemaker among the inmates, he was set to work".³³

Besides the work in the almshouse itself, the inmates were engaged in many outdoor chores. A garden was kept in which vegetables were grown to supply the institution and field crops such as oats, barley and hay were raised as well. A considerable amount of work was involved in raising and harvesting these crops. Also, horses, pigs, cows and sheep had to be fed and kept clean. In addition, the inmates were engaged in keeping the buildings and fences belonging to the almshouse in repair and supplying the institution with fuel.

Another type of work which the inmates performed was the interment of dead paupers. Some inmates were employed in making coffins and shrouds, while others dug graves and buried the dead. Paupers who died in the almshouse were usually buried in the almshouse cemetery, but relatives or friends of the deceased could bury them elsewhere if they agreed to pay funeral expenses.³⁴ On occasion, the inmates buried the bodies of paupers who died outside the almshouse. For example, they buried the corpses of some immigrants³⁵ and the bodies of paupers sent to the almshouse from the City of Saint John. "The bodies of paupers who

³¹ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. H, Sept. 12, 1843. Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Almshouse and Workhouse, Rules I, XX and XV.

³² *Ibid.*, Rules X, XI and IX.

³³ *Morning News* (Saint John), Mar. 30, 1860.

³⁴ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. H, Sept. 12, 1843. Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Almshouse and Workhouse, Rule XIX.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Bk. J, June 6, 1849.

have died in the Gaol and Hospital and those unclaimed on whom inquests have been held were sent to the Almshouse for interment . . .”³⁶

Although an attempt was made to provide employment for all healthy inmates of the almshouse, frequent complaints were voiced that there was not enough work provided for the paupers. For at least two years after the almshouse opened, the land about the institution was not under cultivation,³⁷ but after that time the inmates were probably engaged in clearing and improving the soil. Between 1847 and 1851 the members of the Grand Jury made constant complaints about the lack of work for the inmates. For example, in 1851 they stated that “the necessity of some provision for . . . the employment of adults is again very apparent to the Jury”.³⁸ Charges about the scarcity of work again were prominent during the period from 1858 to 1864 as various justices suggested that the lack of productive outdoor employment was due to the mismanagement of farm lands.

It was true, that a small amount of outdoor labor was done, but Mr. Cunningham [the Keeper] had not the time to superintend it; they had planted potatoes several years and owing to the failure of the crop there had always been a loss and now all they obtained off the land was hay.³⁹

In order to keep the inmates busy and help support the institution, a need to bring the land into a higher state of cultivation existed. It appears efforts were made to this end because in 1873 the Grand Jury praised the keeper and matron for having obtained increased work from a larger number of inmates than ever before.⁴⁰ In 1880 a committee reported that the commissioners of the almshouse were making “the best use possible of the lands in which the Almshouse is situated and of all inmates capable of work”.⁴¹ By this time, the farm was becoming more firmly established and was beginning to serve the purpose for which it was intended. That is, it provided work for the inmates and food for them to eat. Whether the farm contributed to an increase or a reduction in the costs of operating the institution is difficult to determine. The significance of the farm is

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk. N, Mar. 26, 1872.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Bk. H, Mar. 20, 1845.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Bk. K, Mar. 21, 1851.

³⁹ *Morning News* (Saint John), Mar. 30, 1860.

⁴⁰ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. O, Apr. 3, 1873.

⁴¹ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Municipal Council, Saint John County, Bk. I, Oct. 5, 1880.

that it provided an opportunity for the employment of paupers who might have been idle otherwise.

The commissioners of the almshouse made an attempt to keep children busy as well as adults. It is known, for example, that children of school age attended an elementary school within the institution. At some intervals, particularly in the first ten years of the institution's existence, the education was of poor quality.

The Jury were pained beyond measure to find so large a number of children maintained in a Public Institution without any competent instruction or proper system of education... the Jury call upon them [the Almshouse Commissioners] to give every attention to the system of Education and constant employment — The neglect of this matter must tend to throw the unfortunate recipients of charity when they arrive at maturity upon the world to form a new generation of vagrants.⁴²

Comments regarding education are much more favorable beginning in the 1850's. In 1855 forty children were being instructed by a licensed male teacher.⁴³ Five years later it was reported that the same number were in attendance but they were being taught by one of the inmates. At that time it was suggested that two teachers should be employed full time in order to improve the quality of education.⁴⁴ In the early 1870's twenty-two children were taught under difficult circumstances because the wing in which the school was located was in an extremely dilapidated condition.⁴⁵ Whether classes continued in this wing until after renovations were made is unknown. Although few comments occur on the subject of education in the almshouse after this time, it is evident that elementary education continued and no doubt it was beneficial to the majority who received it.

While it was important to provide regular work for the adults and education for the children, it was equally important to have a proper classification of inmates in the almshouse. The Saint John City and County Almshouse, as well as most other almshouses of New Brunswick, however, were deficient in this respect. Essentially, the only classification in the Saint John establishment was by race and sex. In the first few

⁴² N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. J, June 11, 1850.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Bk. K, June 11, 1855.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Bk. L, Mar. 20, 1860.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Bk. N, Mar. 25, 1872.

years of the building's existence no accommodations were provided for Negroes.⁴⁶ Once provisions were made available for them, however, they were housed in a separate building from Whites.⁴⁷ Although segregation of Negroes was common in the nineteenth century, it is more startling to learn that at one interval separation of the sexes in the almshouse was non-existent. The Grand Jury regretted this fact and suggested "that the male and female wards be entirely separated from each other . . ."⁴⁸ No doubt this situation was soon remedied because the danger of promiscuity in an institution of this sort was common enough without encouraging it.

The register of the almshouse for 1843 records the admission of men, women and children of all ages and conditions into the institution. Aged and infirm, cripples, mentally retarded, blind and able-bodied were mixed together.⁴⁹ This lack of classification, except by sex, had been strongly condemned by the Report of the Royal Commission of 1834 in Great Britain. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 had been designed among other purposes to put an end to this indiscriminate mixing of people in the pauper institutions of Great Britain. Despite its passage, the mingling system continued into the present century. Since New Brunswick enacted no legislation of this nature, the general mixed almshouse was not only common in the nineteenth century but continued well into this century. In 1928 a New Brunswick welfare survey pointed out the heterogeneous groups which occupied the almshouses of the province. It also revealed that six almshouses in New Brunswick, including the Saint John County establishment, housed children.

Generally speaking, however, the children share the life of the adults, aged, and infirm, who are in the almshouse, eating in the same rooms and sharing the same sleeping and toilet accommodations. In many cases aged men and women; the feeble minded; the senile; crippled and incurable; unmarried mothers; dependent families; children and infants were all found in the same home, separated only by one broad classification of sex.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, Mar. 20, 1846.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, May 15, 1847.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, Mar. 27, 1847.

⁴⁹ N.B. Museum, Saint John, Record Book of the Saint John County Almshouse and Workhouse, 1843-1849.

⁵⁰ *New Brunswick Child Welfare Survey*, Report of a Survey conducted by the Canadian Council on Child Welfare at the Request of the Kiwanis Club and the Central Welfare Council of Saint John, 1928-29, p. 148.

This description is essentially the same as that of a provincial welfare study of 1949.⁵¹

The almshouse in the nineteenth century was run as economically as possible with a limited qualified staff. Under the circumstances, the municipalities did their best to provide satisfactory food, shelter and protection to dependent persons. Admittance to the almshouse was the first consideration and outdoor relief was regarded as necessary if accommodations were not available in it. Little thought was given to the rehabilitation of dependent persons in their own homes or the homes of friends. Despite its shortcomings, the care provided by the almshouse was better than the condition from which the majority of the inmates were taken.

The bright and cheerful appearance of some of the rooms would astonish many persons who think of this establishment as a repulsive place for the maintenance of paupers; hundreds of the inmates are more comfortable here than they could possibly expect to be if dependent on their own exertions for a living.⁵²

The development of specialized institutions, such as orphan asylums, homes for the aged and the Lunatic Asylum, helped to relieve the almshouse of certain numbers of destitute people in "special need" categories. These institutions, however, were not large enough or not enough of them existed to prevent the almshouse from being a "catch-all" for paupers.

The improper classification of inmates in the almshouse at times had serious consequences. This was particularly true during the years in which the Saint John City and County Almshouse served as both a pauper asylum and a hospital for the poor. In no year were the consequences of this system felt more severely than in the year 1847. In 1846 the Grand Jury was alarmed at the number of sick inmates in the almshouse. Consequently, the Jury recommended "that a suitable building separate and apart from the Almshouse be immediately prepared for the sick".⁵³ In January 1847 a committee acting on this recommendation

⁵¹ *Public Welfare Services in New Brunswick*, Report of a survey conducted by the Canadian Welfare Council at the request of the Health Survey Committee of New Brunswick, 1949, p. 61.

⁵² N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. P, Mar. 1877.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, June 13, 1846.

proposed that sick and diseased immigrants and paupers be accommodated in the former City Poorhouse in accordance with the Almshouse Act of 1838.⁵⁴ This plan might have been successful if the typhus epidemic of 1847 had not occurred. In the spring of that year an unusually large number of sick and diseased immigrants began arriving in Saint John. At first, accommodations were made available on Partridge Island and in various parts of the City, including the former City Almshouse. As these facilities became crowded many immigrants were sent to the City and County Almshouse.

We visited the emigrant [*sic*] at the almshouse, on Saturday the 28th August. We found the apartments filled, but clean and in good order. Heretofore, much inconvenience arose from the crowded condition of the wards; but the buildings which have been recently erected afford accommodation at present... it will appear 1148 patients labouring under fever and dysentery have been admitted into the emigrant [*sic*] hospitals at the almshouse establishment since 1st May, of whom 377 have been discharged cured, 213 have died and 558 are still remaining in hospital, under the care of only one physician...⁵⁵

It appears, then, that the City and County Almshouse served as a hospital for fever patients, as well as a poorhouse, for nearly four months in the spring and summer of 1847. Conditions in the almshouse improved late in August when buildings were completed near it to accommodate sick and diseased immigrants.

The indiscriminate mixing of parish paupers and immigrants of all ages and conditions with those suffering from typhus had serious consequences. From available statistics, it is evident that the health of all inmates sick and well suffered alike. During the year March 1847 to March 1848, 2,381 immigrants and 610 parish paupers were maintained at the almshouse. This was approximately five times the number admitted in any other year from 1845 to 1860. The death toll was appalling as 560 emigrants and 126 parish paupers died at the almshouse during that fateful year.⁵⁶ The large number of deaths at the almshouse and elsewhere in the Saint John area would doubtless have been reduced if suitable accommodations for the diseased had been available during the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, Jan. 5, 1847.

⁵⁵ *Papers Relative to Emigration to the British Provinces in North America*, House of Commons, Great Britain, 1847-48, Colebrooke to Grey, Sept. 28, 1847, Enclosure 3.

⁵⁶ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. J, June 6, 1848.

epidemic.⁵⁷ No one anticipated the events of 1847, however, so few provisions were made prior to the influx of many of the immigrants. Under the circumstances temporary shelter and protection had to be found until better accommodations were provided. This accounts for the introduction of diseased immigrants into the almshouse and the large number of deaths which occurred there as a result.

The housing of sick and healthy inmates together at the almshouse not only occurred during 1847 but in other years as well. This was due to the fact that public hospital facilities were not available in Saint John prior to 1865. Under the Almshouse Act of 1838 the City Poorhouse was supposed to be converted into an infirmary once the City and County Almshouse was completed. Although the City Poorhouse was used as an infirmary in 1847, it is questionable whether it was used for that purpose before or after that year. Therefore, the City and County Almshouse continued to house sick inmates, some of whom were suffering from contagious diseases. For example, cholera patients occupied wards in the almshouse during the epidemic of 1854.⁵⁸

The almshouse is filled with children, the offspring of well-to-do and poor alike. In twelve days there were forty-eight cases of cholera in this institution alone and twenty-six deaths.⁵⁹

The contagious nature of this dread disease must have had a considerable effect on all inmates in the almshouse. The extent of the epidemic in that institution, however, is unknown. The indiscriminate mixing of sick and well inmates at the almshouse continued despite the epidemics of 1847 and 1854. It was these plagues, however, that prompted the Board of Health for the City of Saint John to speak out in favor of the establishment of a hospital in Saint John.

It must be confessed that our almshouse, the conjoined and condensed charity for the sick and wounded, and for the pauperized of both sexes and all ages, is an incompatible combination of Hospital and Poor House, and does not comfort with the progress of philanthropy or the improvements of the age.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Blue Book of Statistics, 1856. Annual Report of the Commissioners of the Board of Health for the City of Saint John for 1856.

⁵⁸ This was in part due to the destruction of the Immigrant buildings at the Almshouse in a fire of 1853. These buildings were not replaced until 1855 (see appendix to Legislative Journals of 1856, Accounts of Commissioners of Saint John County Almshouse for support of sick and destitute emigrants for 1855).

⁵⁹ *Telegraph Journal* (Saint John), Nov. 13, 1931, Copy of an address delivered by G. E. Fenety in the Mechanic's Institute, c.a. 1893.

⁶⁰ Appendix to Legislative Journals of 1858, Annual Report of the Commissioners of the Board of Health for the City and County of Saint John for 1857.

In 1858 and 1859 the Grand Jury complained of the intermingling of sick and healthy inmates in the almshouse. In order to eliminate this problem, they recommended that separate wings be erected at the institution for the use of the sick.⁶¹ A building programme carried out shortly after that time must have alleviated conditions temporarily because no more complaints were heard on this subject until 1867. In that year, the Grand Jury pointed out the emphasis placed on the need for a hospital by Dr. Baxter, the almshouse physician.

I may say there is no separate ward for the treatment of Fevers or other contagious diseases. At present fever and other patients must be admitted into the Main Building and thus a nidus is formed for the spread of the disease through the house; greater success in treatment might be expected were the above suggestion carried out.⁶²

In the early 1870's two wings extending from the main building of the almshouse were renovated. Whether or not a separate ward was provided for the sick at that time is unknown. However, by 1874 the Grand Jury was able to give a favorable report on the premises.

There is now no uncomfortable and unhealthy crowding of inmates into rooms entirely too small for the number assigned to them, so that the building is kept clean and pleasant throughout and the atmosphere is fresh and pure in every apartment.⁶³

A more suitable classification of inmates in the almshouse was at last feasible. It appears that sickness in the institution was not a major problem after 1874. This was probably owing to the fact that both the General Public Hospital, built in 1865, and the Hospital for Infectious Diseases, opened in 1872, provided a place for the majority of sick paupers who previously had been admitted to the almshouse.

Besides the disapproval regarding the indiscriminate mixing of paupers in the almshouse, other criticisms were made. Some of these were concerned with the state of ventilation in the almshouse, the personal hygiene of paupers and the type of food the inmates received. Between December 1846, when the Grand Jury reported that the ventilation throughout the almshouse was unsuitable,⁶⁴ and 1860, when the ventilation system was improved, constant complaints were made about

⁶¹ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. L, Mar. 24, 1858 and Mar. 25, 1859.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Bk. M, Mar. 29, 1867.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Bk. O, Mar. 31, 1874.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, Dec. 12, 1846.

its inadequacy. In the meantime, paupers must have suffered great discomfort. For example, in 1853 it was suggested that a ventilation chimney be built because "The only ventilation at present being from the windows which the inmates will not allow to remain open".⁶⁵ It was understandable that the inmates did not like the draft created by such an unsuitable method of ventilation particularly in the colder weather. The need for a proper system of ventilation was evident in an institution which, usually, housed over two hundred people. The odor from the privies, the bedding and clothing of the inmates, and from the inmates themselves was considerable at times. For example, during one interval the state of the privies was deplorable and the fumes from them pervaded the whole building.

There are no water closets in the building. The small rooms on the landing of the stairs are used as such and consequently a stifling smell is felt throughout the upper wards.⁶⁶

With regard to the inmates, it was often difficult to train them in habits of personal cleanliness. The rules pertaining to personal hygiene were brief. The inmates were required to wash themselves every morning and clean their hands and face before meals. Also, they were supposed to have their dirty clothes washed once a week.⁶⁷ How successful the administration was in enforcing these rules and what cleaning facilities were available is difficult to determine. However, it was reported that "the inmates are chiefly of that class that can only be kept clean with great trouble and watchfulness".⁶⁸ It appears, then, that the matter at times presented some difficulty, especially with regard to those inmates who were not able or willing to look after themselves.

The available sources seem to indicate that economy was an important factor in determining the type of food served at the almshouse. In order to keep costs at a minimum the diet was of poor quality. For example, Dr. Bayard, a former almshouse physician, stated that "the food of the pauper is too often reduced to the lowest standard capable of sustaining life".⁶⁹ The existing records of the produce raised on the almshouse farm

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Bk. K, Dec. 17, 1853.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk. L, Mar. 24, 1858.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Bk. H, Sept. 12, 1843. Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Almshouse and Workhouse, Rules VII, VIII and XI.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Bk. L, Mar. 24, 1858.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Bk. N, Apr. 15, 1871.

and the supplies purchased for the institution give a good indication of the diet of most inmates.⁷⁰ It seems that the diet consisted mainly of cereals, vegetables (especially potatoes), soups and stews, beef, salt pork, dried cod fish, beans, bread, biscuits, tea, coffee and milk. The food was probably varied somewhat, especially for sick inmates for whom the regular diet was unsuitable. Little wastage of rations occurred, although spoilage of tea and fish was mentioned on occasion. Complaints of the quality of food were rare, but in 1867 the diet was strongly attacked by the almshouse physician, Dr. Baxter, in a letter to the Grand Jury. Dr. Baxter wrote:

In reply to your enquiry respecting the diet table of the Almshouse I have recommended the increase of its animal constituents... at present it is too vegetable and cannot support life much less restore debilitated nature. The use of Pork and Beans once or twice in the week... Also... Milk, it is nature's food for the young and nothing can supply its place.⁷¹

It is not certain if his advice was followed because little mention of the diet table was made after that time. In fact, the only complaints concerned a shortage of potatoes which occurred in the early 1870's and was quickly rectified.

Another important aspect of almshouse living was effective discipline. Generally speaking, the rules of the almshouse provided for punishment which usually resulted in a temporary loss of a privilege. Paupers could be chastised for such offences as drunkenness, disorderly conduct, theft, wastage of food and use of obscene language. The keeper was authorized to confine paupers who broke the rules but he had to await the decision of one of the commissioners to inflict further punishment on the violator. Usually the commissioners recommended solitary or other types of confinement for a maximum period of one week. Under solitary confinement paupers were not allowed to see anyone except the keeper or the person attending to their needs, and their diet during this time consisted solely of bread and water.⁷² It is possible that some inmates were discharged from the institution for serious misbehavior, especially after

⁷⁰ *Annual Report of the Auditor on Saint John City and County Accounts*, 1859, 1865, 1867-1899.

⁷¹ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. M, Mar. 29, 1867.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Bk. H, Sept. 12, 1843. Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Almshouse and Workhouse, Rules IV, XVI and XVII.

warnings or failure of the regular forms of detention. No evidence, however, has been found on this subject.

Another important aspect of the almshouse which deserves attention is a general description of some of the defects or complaints about its management, the various records kept and the handling of the institution's accounts. Periodic inspections of the almshouse establishment by justices of the peace, the Grand Jury and the commissioners themselves were valuable because they often led to improvements in the general management of the institution and consequently in the welfare of its inmates.

Between 1848 and 1850 the Grand Jury was critical of certain aspects of the administration of the almshouse. For example, the Jury pointed out that services and supplies could be more cheaply provided by public contract than by private arrangement.⁷³ The Jury also stated that the almshouse commissioners should not be allowed to furnish supplies to the institution. They further suggested that additional records be kept in order to determine more accurately the cost of running the institution. For example, records were needed to estimate the value of labor done by the inmates and the costs per capita of maintaining them.⁷⁴ In 1849 the Sessions ordered that accounts be kept of the value of goods in stock as well as the birthplace and last place of residence of each inmate.⁷⁵ About the same time a committee, appointed to study the Poor Laws as they applied to Saint John County,⁷⁶ was responsible for some significant changes in almshouse administration. The recommended alterations were embodied in an act of 1850 whereby the commissioners continued to be appointed by the Lieutenant Governor-in-Council and not by the Sessions as some had advocated. They were, however, made subject to the control of the Sessions with regard to the management and treatment of the poor. Also, the commissioners, personally, were forbidden to furnish provisions or supplies to the almshouse. In addition, the justices were permitted to inspect the almshouse,⁷⁷ so that the Sessions could be made more fully aware of almshouse routine.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, Bk. J, June 17, 1848.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Bk. J, June 16, 1849.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Bk. J, July 7, 1849.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, Apr. 1, 1848.

⁷⁷ 13 Victoria, c.15 (1850).

Despite these changes, the almshouse management again came under attack in the late 1850's. The controversy began in 1859 when the Grand Jury recommended that an extension be made to the almshouse in order to relieve crowding. At the same time, the Jury pointed out that general inefficiency in the management of the institution existed because the farm lands were mismanaged, fuel was being wasted and supplies were bought at too high a price.⁷⁸ The Jury also complained that a lack of productive work was being done by the inmates.⁷⁹ This view was supported by Justice Dunn who charged that the commissioners were neglecting their duties.⁸⁰ Dunn, a former almshouse commissioner, took exception to the Jury's remarks concerning the enlargement of the almshouse. He stated that he "was opposed to any further sum being expended upon the Almshouse while it was under its presents management".⁸¹ However, he did not have enough support to block the proposed addition to the building and it was completed in 1860.⁸² Because of these complaints, it was suggested by Justice Keltie that the commissioners be appointed by the Sessions and not by the Lieutenant Governor-in-Council. The City Recorder pointed out that this was unnecessary because the Sessions exercised control over the commissioners even though they did not appoint them. As the law stood, the justices were entitled to inspect all details of almshouse administration. For example, they could enquire into the way in which all monies were spent, check the accounts and the general management of the institution.⁸³ The outcome of this controversy was a vote of confidence in the commissioners carried by a majority of fourteen to seven.⁸⁴ The commissioners were exonerated for the time being but once more a long list of charges was drawn up against them. The disagreements mainly concerned the commissioners' failure to exercise firm control over the activities of the almshouse keeper, who was directly responsible to them, and accusations that the rules and regulations of the almshouse were not being enforced. These charges

⁷⁸ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. L, Mar. 22, 1859.

⁷⁹ *Morning News* (Saint John), Mar. 26, 1860.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Mar. 30, 1860.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Mar. 28, 1859.

⁸² *Ibid.*, Mar. 30, 1860.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Mar. 21, 1860.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Mar. 30, 1860.

were laid before the October Sessions but none was sustained.⁸⁵ The commissioners had withstood vigorous attacks on the way in which they performed their duties. This criticism, no doubt, was healthy in that it made them more aware of their responsibilities.

Other grounds for complaint existed because the residents of Saint John County were supporting a large number of paupers who did not live in their area. For example, in 1859 nearly 14 per cent of those admitted to the almshouse were unemployed railway workers and other paupers from beyond the County.⁸⁶ In order to correct this situation, the Grand Jury suggested that steps be taken for an enactment allowing commissioners to send paupers from beyond the County back to the parish in which they had legal residence.⁸⁷ Although an Act of Settlement was passed in 1876,⁸⁸ it is not known if the terms of this legislation were enforced effectively.

Under the Almshouse Act of 1838, the commissioners had to submit to the Sessions an annual estimate of expenditures for the support and maintenance of the poor for the following year. From this statement the Sessions ordered the annual poor assessment to be collected from the taxpayers of the County.⁸⁹ In order to calculate the almshouse accounts, the commissioners made the almshouse keeper responsible each quarter for giving them a detailed report of the institution's records. This report included the following: a return of inmates, provisions, clothing, bedding, furniture, utensils, stock, manufactured items and money handled.⁹⁰

An act of 1844 provided for an annual audit of the almshouse accounts and made it necessary for the commissioners to keep a detailed statement of the inmates.⁹¹ From these records it is possible to gain some general information on the operation of the almshouse. For example, the major source of income for the maintenance of the establishment came from

⁸⁵ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. L, Oct. 2, 1860.

⁸⁶ *Annual Report of the Auditor on Saint John City and County Accounts*, 1859.

⁸⁷ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. M, Mar. 28, 1865.

⁸⁸ 39 Victoria, c.11 (1876).

⁸⁹ 1 Victoria, c.17 (1838).

⁹⁰ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Quarter Sessions, Saint John County, Bk. H, Sept. 12, 1843. Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Almshouse and Workhouse, Rule II.

⁹¹ 7 Victoria, c.23 (1844).

the annual poor assessments levied on the taxpayers of the County. Some other revenues came from payments in support of illegitimate children, the labour of inmates and the sale of farm produce or stock. On the other hand, the major expenditures of the institution were for supplies and provisions, salaries of employees, improvements and repairs to the premises, erection of new buildings, outdoor relief, farming operations and bastardy expenses.⁹²

The available records of admissions and discharges show that a constant movement of paupers in and out of the almshouse occurred and that a number of babies were born in the institution as well. For example, a return of inmates of the Saint John City and County Almshouse and Workhouse for the year ending December 31, 1865, is as follows:⁹³

	Men	Women	Children	Total
No. of Inmates Jan. 1, 1865	61	61	57	179
No. of Inmates Admitted in 1865	123	153	123	399
No. of Inmates Born in 1865			16	16
	184	214	196	594
	Men	Women	Children	Total
No. of Deaths in 1865	29	33	34	96
No. Discharged in 1865	89	122	92	303
No. of Inmates Dec. 31, 1865	66	59	70	195

Although an annual sum was allotted for outdoor relief, it is not clear who had the actual authority to grant it. It is certain that this right was not always vested in the almshouse commissioners.⁹⁴ The commissioners did, however, gain control of the Grundy Charity which was established as a result of the death of Isabella Grundy who died in 1837 and left a quantity of land to the Overseers of the Poor for the City of Saint John. Since the office of overseer was abolished in 1843, legislative enactment was necessary to enable the benefits of the Charity to be legally administered by the commissioners. This authorization did not come about until 1875.⁹⁵ Out of this fund the commissioners paid a specified yearly amount of relief to persons in the City who were not inmates of the almshouse or recipients of outdoor relief.

⁹² *Annual Report of the Auditor on Saint John City and County Accounts*, 1859, 1865, 1867-1899.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 1865.

⁹⁴ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Municipal Council, Saint John County, Bk. I, Jan. 15, 1878 and *Evening Gazette* (Saint John), Aug. 17, 1893.

⁹⁵ 38 Victoria, c.108 (1875).

Prior to 1883, the money assessed for the poor was collected and paid by the collectors directly to the chairman of the almshouse commissioners who not only received but disbursed all monies. The other commissioners approved accounts and ordered payments but handled no funds themselves. At the close of the fiscal year an auditor inspected the almshouse books and issued a financial statement. By this time most poor assessments had been collected for the year and the money was given to the chairman who paid outstanding almshouse accounts. After this was done a large amount of money sometimes remained on hand and usually was not deposited in the bank. For example, in 1864 and 1881 about \$11,000 remained on hand and in 1882 over \$12,000. This loose system of handling public funds was criticised from time to time but nothing was done about it.⁹⁶ The only way in which the traditional system could be changed, it seemed, was by a crisis. This occurred in 1883 when a shortage of nearly \$9,000 was reported in the almshouse funds and a committee was immediately appointed to investigate it.⁹⁷ In April 1884 the initial difference was reported as \$8,846,⁹⁸ but by October this amount had been reduced to \$7,264. David Tapley, chairman of the almshouse commissioners at the time of the shortage, reported that he might have made mistakes in keeping the accounts or that errors existed in previous audits. He naively added, "I cannot account for it in any way.... For the last ten years I have felt something was wrong but what I could not tell."⁹⁹ The commissioners were given a month to make up the deficit despite the fact that the chairman, Mr. Tapley, alone handled the almshouse funds. Since the commissioners refused to meet this demand, it was requested that they be removed from office. The commissioners, other than Tapley, argued that since they did not receive or disburse any almshouse funds they were not responsible for the shortage and, therefore, it was unfair to ask them to resign.¹⁰⁰ However, the County Council refused to authorize the annual assessment for poor relief until the commissioners were dismissed and a new board appointed.¹⁰¹ Therefore, a change in administrative personnel followed. In the meantime, Tapley's

⁹⁶ N.B. Provincial Archives, MS Minutes, Municipal Council, Saint John County, Bk. 2, Oct. 6, 1884.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, Bk. 2, Apr. 24, 1883.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Bk. 2, Apr. 23, 1884.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, Bk. 2, Oct. 6, 1884.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Bk. 2, Dec. 10, 1884.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, Bk. 2, Apr. 28, 1885.

lawyer proposed that if his client paid \$2,000 to the County Treasury legal proceedings against the commissioners should cease.¹⁰² After considerable delay the offer was accepted and the matter was dropped.¹⁰³ During the course of the investigation, it was never mentioned that Tapley, or some of the commissioners in collusion with him, might have been guilty of embezzlement of public monies. However, there is no doubt that the entire board must have been under suspicion. In view of the circumstances, the appointment of new commissioners was justified. With regard to the reimbursement of the shortage, the members of the board, including Tapley, were treated with great leniency. The committee which investigated the affair was responsible for an enactment that altered the mode of handling almshouse funds. This act compelled the collectors to pay the funds gathered to the County Treasurer, who in turn deposited the money in a public bank to the credit of the commissioners. Such money could only be withdrawn by a cheque signed by three commissioners.¹⁰⁴

The new commissioners, appointed in 1885, apparently handled affairs quite well, but in the late 1890's they faced an indebtedness of over \$8,000 arising from circumstances beyond their control. For example, a number of repairs and improvements had been made to the institution, the annual amounts assessed were rarely collected in full, the commissioners lost \$3,400 due to the failure of the bank which held their accounts and they had had to pay the debts of their predecessors amounting to \$1,300. In order to pay the overdraft and make further improvements to the institution, debentures in the amount of \$13,000 were issued under an act of 1899. The committee which studied the affairs of the almshouse at this time reported that in its opinion "the institution is well and efficiently managed, evidencing a large amount of time and attention devoted to administering its affairs by the Board of Commissioners . . ." ¹⁰⁵

The Saint John City and County Almshouse served a useful purpose in the nineteenth century. It provided food, shelter and protection to hundreds of paupers in the Saint John area. It was beneficial to many inmates because here they were supervised, disciplined, instructed and

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, Bk. 2, July 22, 1885.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, Bk. 2, Apr. 27, 1886.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Bk. 2, Jan. 15, 1884.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Bk. 4, Oct. 3, 1898.

employed. Also, it was more economical and convenient than boarding paupers with residents under a contract system. It is true that the institution was not always run as efficiently as it should have been, but healthy criticism often led to improvements.

The darkest chapter in the history of the institution was during the year 1847. The housing of sick, especially those suffering from contagious diseases, in the almshouse with ordinary inmates had dreadful consequences. Gradually a movement began which resulted in the erection of a public hospital for the Saint John area in 1865 and a hospital for infectious diseases seven years later. After this time the almshouse no longer had to serve the incompatible purpose of being both a hospital and an asylum for the poor.¹⁰⁶

Another deficiency, not as easily rectified, was that the inmates were not properly classified and separated according to their particular need. The development of specialized institutions such as hospitals, the Lunatic Asylum, orphanages and homes for the aged did relieve the almshouse of a number of people who might have been housed there otherwise. These institutions, however, were not enough to prevent the almshouse from remaining a "catch-all" for paupers of all ages and conditions. Despite its shortcomings it was far superior to the conditions from which many of the inmates were removed.

¹⁰⁶ William BAYARD, M.D., *History of the General Public Hospital In The City of Saint John*, Saint John, 1896.