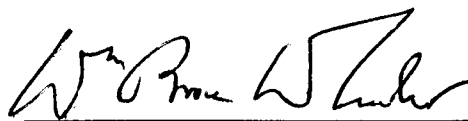


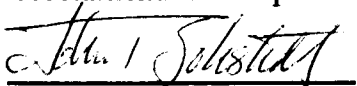
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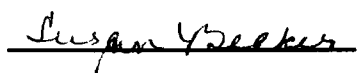
I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Amy R. Miller entitled "The Spinning Wheel: Poverty and Gender in Colonial Boston." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.



William Bruce Wheeler
Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:





Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

THE SPINNING WHEEL: POVERTY AND GENDER
IN COLONIAL BOSTON

A THESIS
PRESENTED FOR THE
MASTER OF ARTS
DEGREE

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE

AMY R. MILLER

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I owe the greatest debt to my parents. Without their generous financial and moral assistance, I would not have reached my destination.

ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of The Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor. It was a work-relief project established in 1748 by wealthy Bostonians to employ the town's growing number of impoverished inhabitants, particularly women and children, in a linen manufactory. Using Boston's newspapers and town poor-relief records, provincial and town legislative records, prescriptive literature, trade records, and the sermons and pamphlets promoting the manufactory the thesis examines three aspects of life in colonial Boston to explain why the SEIEP was established: Boston's position in the Atlantic economy, methods of poor relief, and the role and value of women in colonial America. It is hoped this thesis will illuminate the presence of poverty in colonial America, a social reality many historians continue to deny. It hopes to demonstrate how poverty affected the social, political, and economic lives and relationships of men and women in pre-Revolutionary America.

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INTRODUCTION

A harbor protected by numerous small islands and fortified hills, the colonial town of Boston provided the ideal setting for the establishment of fishing, trade, and commerce. Its wide, pebble-paved streets were home to some of the American colonies' most noted and illustrious merchants, lawyers, and doctors. Upon their arrival in colonial Boston, many contemporary observers were at once struck by the inhabitants' ability to combine religious fervor with commercial acquisitiveness. In 1699, Englishman Edward Ward observed that:

The inhabitants seem very Religious, showing many outward and visible Signs of an inward and Spiritual Grace: But tho' they wear in their faces the Innocence of Doves, you will find them in their Dealings, as Subtile as Serpents. Interest is their Faith, Money their God and Large Possessions the only Heaven they covet.¹

By mid-eighteenth century, these commercially acquisitive merchants of Boston could no longer look forward to a prosperous future. According to historian Gary Nash, colonial America's port cities were the forefront of economic, political, and social change. But they were inextricably tied in the eighteenth century to a global, expanding market economy that brought prosperity to some, and grinding poverty to many more.²

¹Quoted in Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, A Topographical and Historical Description of Boston (Boston: Alfred Mudge and Son, 1871), 54-55.

²Gary Nash, The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

As this thesis will show, currency shortages, declining trade, inflation, war, and disease were forcing hundreds of colonists into poverty and destitution, sending the cost of poor relief and tax rates soaring. Settlement laws and the colonial system of warning out could no longer keep out strangers and undesirables. Because colonists believed that poverty stemmed from idleness and vice, one solution to Boston's economic problems was putting the poor to work. For the infirm and deserving poor, charity was ordained by God's command. But for those who refused to work, Charles Chauncy, the pastor of Boston's oldest Congregational church vowed:

We are under no such Obligations with Respect to the other sort of poor People, those who can work, but won't; who may have Work to do, and have Activity of Body to do it, but no Will to employ themselves in Labor. Concerning these Poor, it is the Command of an inspired Apostle, *that they shall not eat.*³

In 1748, Boston's economic and social leaders established a voluntary society entitled the United Society for Manufactures and Importation, later renamed the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor (SEIEP) in 1753. With an initial donation of 20 shillings followed by 5 shillings every four months, wealthy Bostonians could help establish a linen manufactory which would employ spinners and weavers in one building. The SEIEP would not only employ the town's able-bodied poor and reduce the rising cost of poor relief, its founders believed, it would also help balance New

³Charles Chauncy, The Idle Poor Secluded from the Bread of Charity by the Christian Law (Boston, 1752), 6.

England's trade deficit by keeping the £50,000 sent annually to England and Europe to purchase linens in the colonies.⁴

But understandings of femininity and masculinity also governed the creation of the SEIEP. Boston's leaders realized all too clearly that the majority of poor relief recipients were "Women and Children . . . our most common and idle Beggars," and the SEIEP provided them with "Work proper for their Sex and age."⁵ Because of the SEIEP's praiseworthy efforts, its supporters declared that "some hundreds of Women and Children have . . . been kept at Work, whereby they have done a great deal towards supplying themselves with Bread, to the easing the Town of its Burthen in providing for the poor."⁶ More importantly, these poor women were living on the fringes of colonial society outside the sphere and proper authority of husbands and fathers. Although it was not the stated intention of the SEIEP to place women in an occupation which legitimized male authority, the SEIEP was built upon a colonial social structure which defined women as the servers and subordinates of men. Work proper for their sex and age was work that did not permit women to question their roles and destinies as virtuous mothers, wives, help-meets, and servants. Establishing a spinning manufactory seemed the perfect

⁴ The Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor. . . Articles of Incorporation . . . with a List of Subscribers (Boston, 1748, reprint 1754), 1.

⁵ Charles Chauncy, Industry and Frugality Proposed as the Surest Means to make Us a Rich and Flourishing People: And the Linen Manufactory Recommended As tending to Promote These among us (Boston, 1753), 10.

⁶ Chauncy, The Idle Poor Secluded from the Bread of Charity by the Christian Law, 18-19.

solution for the employment of women whose impoverished lives seemed to threaten social stability and the foundation of patriarchal authority.

This thesis attempts to examine the reasons behind the establishment of the SEIEP by examining three aspects of life in colonial Boston from the mid-seventeenth century to the demise of the SEIEP in 1759. The first chapter examines Boston's economic decline and its changing role in the Atlantic economy. The second chapter examines colonial traditions of poor relief which defined the creation and purposes of the SEIEP. The third chapter examines why the SEIEP was suited to the employment of women by describing the role and value of women and their work in colonial Boston. Using newspaper accounts of the SEIEP, its promotional material, religious sermons promoting the manufactory, trade statistics, poor relief statistics, and prescriptive literature, this thesis is written in the hope that it will demonstrate the interconnectedness of economic, social, and women's histories. More importantly, it is written in the hope that it will illustrate how power is distributed unequally to groups based upon a culture's understanding of prosperity, poverty, and sexuality. As more and more women and their children fell into destitution, colonial Boston's political and spiritual leaders established an institution that would eventually serve as a model for the factory system in the nineteenth century. It is a model that would continue to place the work of women at the bottom of American society's hierarchy well into the twentieth century.

CHAPTER ONE

BOSTON AND THE ATLANTIC ECONOMY

To understand why the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor (SEIEP) was established, the changing role of Boston in the colonial economy must first be examined. Traditionally, American historians have examined the economy of colonial America only to explain the origins of the American Revolution. According to Progressive historians writing at the turn of the century, opposition to Great Britain began when First Lord of the Treasury, George Grenville, raised colonial taxes to offset the cost of the Seven Years' War. Boston's wealthy merchants, accustomed to years of "salutary neglect," resisted the changes Parliament instituted. Once the fervor of resistance fired the colonies' impoverished masses, the colonial elite lost control of the Revolution, and the question of the Revolution's outcome became, in the now infamous words of Carl Becker, not one of "home rule," but of "who was to rule at home."¹

Neo-Whig, or Revisionist, historians refuted this class-based, social interpretation of the American Revolution, and argued instead that political ideology, not economics, prompted colonists to break with Great Britain. According to Bernard Bailyn, colonial

¹ Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763-1776 (New York: Atheneum Press, 1918 reprint, 1968); Carl Becker, The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968, reprint, 1909).

radicals were “concerned, like the eighteenth century British radicals, not with the need to recast the social order nor with the problems of economic inequality and the injustices of stratified societies but with the need to purify a corrupt constitution and fight off the apparent growth of prerogative power.”² In the 1991 Pulitzer Prize winning Radicalism of the American Revolution, Bailyn’s student, Gordon S. Wood, argued that the American Revolution was a social revolution, without class conflict, which transformed the political ideology of all Americans.³ According to Wood, poverty did not exist in pre-Revolutionary America. Instead, patricians and plebeians coexisted harmoniously on the fringes of civilization in a salutary, mobile, hierarchical social order governed by a belief in the British monarchy and personal connections. The Revolution, he argued, toppled this monarchical social order by transforming the “remarkably simple and personal” economy of colonial America. Average colonists, who knew nothing “of the large impersonal institutions and public worlds that were transforming the consciousness of Englishmen at home” became “[a]lmost overnight, the most liberal, the most democratic, the most commercially minded, and the most modern people in the world.”⁴

But in trying to reconcile Progressive and Revisionist historiographical interpretations of the American Revolution, Wood oversimplified economic life in colonial America. Eighteenth century colonial Boston was hardly an idyllic, pastoral

²Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 283.

³Gordon S. Wood, The Radicalism of the American Revolution, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 4.

⁴Ibid. 7.

town isolated from the economic, political, and social changes reshaping Europe and Great Britain. Boston's prosperous merchants, lawyers, doctors, selectmen, and ministers who established the SEIEP, such as Thomas Hutchinson, Andrew Oliver, Thomas Hancock, James Otis Sr., James Otis Jr., Charles Chauncy, and Samuel Cooper, understood that prosperity in a British colony depended upon increasing participation in and manipulation of foreign and domestic trade. It was a town in which profits from trade and war lined the pockets of entrepreneurs like Thomas Hancock and Charles Apthorp.

Hundreds more, however, found themselves impoverished and destitute. By establishing the SEIEP, its founders reveal that the ideological and economic motivations of American colonists on the eve of the Revolution are not separable. Struggling to survive without a stable currency or stable financial institutions, colonists established institutions that addressed Boston's pressing social and economic problems.⁵ Although the causes of poverty stem, in actuality, from a variety of sources, a spouse or parent may die, leaving many dependents, or one's occupation may become obsolete, the founders of the SEIEP argued that the colony's trade imbalance partially explained Boston's economic decline. Because Bostonians imported more linens than they exported, valuable specie found its way into the hands of British, not colonial, merchants. This

⁵For general discussions of Boston's currency shortage see, Benjamin Labaree, Colonial Massachusetts: A History (New York: KTP Press, 1978), chpts. 1,2,11; G.B. Warden, Boston: 1689-1776 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1970) chpts. 4, 5; Cathy Mitten, "The New England Paper Money Tradition and the Massachusetts Land Bank of 1740," MA Thesis, Columbia University, 1979.

pattern, it seems, was reinforced not only by consumer preference in the Age of Mercantilism, but also by Parliamentary legislation.

Although enforcement of the Navigation Acts was notoriously lax, “salutary neglect” is not an accurate description of eighteenth-century British policy in the American colonies. By protecting and restricting colonial trade, Britain hoped to establish a self-sufficient empire that would both increase its domestic revenue and productivity, and strengthen its political power. To acquire gold and silver and thereby dominate global trade, Britain used colonies to serve only as exporters of raw materials and importers of British manufactured goods. Parliament enacted laws prohibiting the manufacture of iron and textiles in all its colonial possessions. By providing bounty payments for the production of naval stores, Britain hoped to encourage the building of ships in colonial America and, consequently, to extend its sea power over Dutch and French trading interests in the New World.⁶ “As trade enables the Subject to support the Administration of Government,” wrote Englishman Otis Little, “the lessening or destroying that of a Rival, has the same effect, as if this Kingdom had enlarged the sources of its own wealth.”⁷

Although laws restricting colonial trade existed since the settlement of the New World began, the series of Navigation Acts passed after 1660 marks the beginning of

⁶Stuart Bruchey, ed., The Colonial Merchant: Sources and Readings (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 1-10; Stanley L. Engerman, “Mercantilism and Overseas Trade, 1700-1800,” in The Economic History of Britain Since 1700, ed. Roderick Floud and Donald McCloskey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 192.

⁷Otis Little, The State of Trade in the Northern Colonies Considered (London, 1749), 8.

decisive British efforts to control colonial trade. Basically, the acts restricted trade by granting English vessels a monopoly of the carrying trade between England and her colonies — the only legal trade routes open to British colonial merchants.⁸ The Navigation Act of 1663 permitted goods to be shipped to any other English plantation, and allowed Boston merchants to load tobacco in Virginia or Maryland, carry it to New England, re-export it to England, and make a tidy profit. But because these shipments benefited colonial, not English merchants, the act imposed a tax on sugar, cotton-wool, indigo, ginger, timber and coco-nuts entering colonial ports.⁹ The Navigation Act of 1696 gave provincial governors more control over colonial trade by establishing vice-admiralty courts to try accused violators and increasing the number of customs officials.¹⁰ It also enacted a system of registry for English-built ships.¹¹

Despite these restrictions, trade with the Caribbean and Holland was common. To stock the shelves of his bookstore with literature from London, Thomas Hancock traded grain, lumber, fish, northern produce and horses for molasses from the Caribbean and manufactured goods from Holland. On December 20, 1743, Hancock instructed Captain Simon Gross “to proceed direct to St. Eustatia [Jamaica] where you will hear how the

⁸“The Navigation Act of 1660: ‘An Act for the Encouraging and Increasing of Shipping and Navigation,” in Bruchey, 57-60.

⁹“The Navigation Act of 1673: ‘An Act for the Incouragement of the Greenland Eastland Trades, and for the Better Secureing The Plantation Trade,’ ” in Ibid., 63-64.

¹⁰Labaree, 195-199; Bruchey, 41-45; Robert Paul Thomas, “A Quantitative Approach to the Study of the Effects of British Imperial Policy upon Colonial Welfare: Some Preliminary Findings,” Journal of Economic History 25 (1965): 615-638.

¹¹The best analysis of these records is Bernard and Lotte Bailyn, Massachusetts Shipping, 1697-1714: A Statistical Study (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1959).

Markets Govern . . . You are to procure a Load of Molasses & proceed back to Boston . . . Should it happen that you Can get bills of Exchange on Holland or England for your Cargo at a good price & a good freight for Holland or England you may take it . . . But if you come back to this place a Load of Molasses will be the best Cargo you can bring here.”¹² Thomas Hutchinson even accused Hancock of making his fortune smuggling tea.¹³

“The Sea Coast of the Province is so extensive,” wrote Governor Jonathan Belcher in 1737, “and has so many Commodious harbours that the small number of Customs House Officers are often complaining they are not able to do much for the preventing of illegal trade.”¹⁴ When the 1.3 million gallons of rum distilled from West Indian molasses began to compete with British interests, Parliament imposed prohibitory duties of foreign sugar, molasses, and rum imported into the colonies from the West Indies in 1733, but they were roundly ignored.¹⁵ Lenient and negligent governors, lax tax collection, and partial juries of local common-law courts also made collecting excise taxes on profitable commodities

¹²“Instructions to Captain Simon Gross,” reprinted in Bruchey, p. 179.

¹³Labaree, 158.

¹⁴Quoted in Labaree, 197.

¹⁵“The Molasses Act of 1733: ‘An Act for the Better Securing and Encouraging of Trade of His Majesty’s Sugar Colonies in America,” in Bruchey, 77-78; George J. Lankevich, ed. Boston: A Chronological and Documentary History, 1602-1970 (New York: Oceana Publications, 1974), 18; Boston Gazette (Boston), 7 May 1733; for additional discussion of opposition see Warden 103.

like molasses and rum from the West Indies and the prosecution of illegal importers of manufactured goods from Holland a difficult task.¹⁶

Despite their ability to avoid trade restrictions, without a cash-crop, merchants in Boston found it difficult to market New England goods to English consumers. Although British bounties on cash crops like indigo, tobacco, and rice enabled planters in the Southern and Middle colonies to profit from direct trade with Britain, the £1,438,702 New England colonists received between 1706-1774 from bounty payments of naval stores like turpentine, hemp, masts, and yard, were not enough to maintain a favorable balance of trade.¹⁷ In 1700, Virginia and Maryland exported a total of £317,302, but imported only £173,148, while merchants in New England exported only £41,486, but imported £91,918.¹⁸ Clearly, what fueled the expansion of colonial trade in New England was not direct trade with England.

New England merchants acquired the necessary capital and credit to purchase the English commodities colonists needed and prized by re-exporting cash crops like tobacco, rice, and indigo from the Southern and Middle colonies to England.¹⁹ Economists call these “invisible earnings” because they fail to appear in the statistical data compiled on

¹⁶W.A. Cole, “Trends in Eighteenth-Century Smuggling,” The Economic History Review 10 (1958): 395-410.

¹⁷Bruchey, 43.

¹⁸Bruchey, 15 (Table 5).

¹⁹On colonial consumption see T.H. Breen, “‘Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” Past and Present 119 (1988): 71-104; Carole Shammas, “Consumer Behavior in Colonial America,” Social Science History 6 (1982): 67-86.

imports and exports.²⁰ These “invisible earnings” also funded the construction of colonial ships which would dominate trade with the West Indies, and seaport towns like Boston quickly became the center of colonial trade and ship building. By the end of the seventeenth century, 261 residents of Boston held shares in 72.5% of all ships registered in Massachusetts; and nearly one of every three Boston males could claim at least partial ownership of a seagoing vessel.²¹ Of the 1,621 vessels registered in Massachusetts between 1697 and 1714, 65.2% claimed Boston as their home port.²²

Boston merchants like SEIEP subscribers John Avery, Andrew Oliver, Joseph Green, Benjamin Kent, Jacob Wendell, William Bowdoin, Joseph Waldo, and Edmund Quincy traded New England foodstuffs, potash (for cleaning the natural oils from wool), fish, whale oil (used for lighting), and bone from Newfoundland to food-scarce, cash-crop producing regions of southern Europe, the southern plantation colonies, and the British West Indies.²³ Because trade with the West Indies required relatively little capital and smaller vessels, 10% of the Boston business community was involved in the West Indian trade on the eve of the Revolution. Only a small number of merchants traded in southern

²⁰James F. Shepard and Gary M. Walton, The economic rise of early America (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Harold Perkins, The Economy of Early America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 26-27.

²¹Bailyn, Massachusetts Shipping, 56, 79 (table 2); James Henretta, “Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston,” William and Mary Quarterly 22 (1965): 87.

²²Bailyn, 97 (table 13).

²³John W. Tyler, Smugglers & Patriots: Boston Merchants and the Advent of the American Revolution (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 11.

Europe because it required larger ships, more capital, and longer journeys which kept the credit and capital of these merchants tied up for longer periods of time.²⁴

The largest number of merchants were wholesalers who dealt and distributed British or East India dry goods exclusively. To acquire the capital to purchase these goods, Boston merchants marketed food produced by farmers in Massachusetts' rural regions. With these earnings, rural farmers purchased English manufactured items otherwise unobtainable. "Demand for northern produce," wrote Massachusetts Governor and historian Thomas Hutchinson, "not only afforded us in return, rum, sugar and molasses sufficient for our own consumption, but left a surplus which, in war times especially, every year gave freight to ships from Boston to England, and paid our debts there or procured a supply of goods."²⁵

Acquiring Northern produce, however, involved an intricate series of market exchanges that falsify the persistent image of the self-sufficient family farm in colonial American historiography.²⁶ Although access to Boston's markets was difficult without adequate roads, the rural regions of Massachusetts, particularly the Connecticut Valley, depended upon merchants in Boston to market small amounts of wheat and other grains,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Thomas Hutchinson, The History of The Province of Massachusetts-Bay. From The Charter of King William and Queen Mary In 1691. Until the Year 1750, ed. Lawrence S. Mayo, vol. II (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 339.

²⁶ See James Henretta, "Families and farms: Mentalité in pre-industrial America," William and Mary Quarterly 35 (1978): 3-32; M. Merrill, "Cash is good to eat: self-sufficiency and exchange in the rural economy of the United States," Radical History Review 7 (Winter): 42-71; C.M. Jedrey, The World of John Cleveland: Family and Community in Eighteenth Century New England (New York: Norton Press, 1979).

butter, cheese, and livestock. In addition to surplus produce, rural farmers in Massachusetts produced pot and pearl ashes for export, while others cut shingles, clapboards, and hoops for market. The principal link between rural farmers and Boston's markets was the local storekeeper, who not only bought and sold domestic and foreign goods, but functioned as the local financier by extending credit and issuing loans to farmers. A typical rural storekeeper like Springfield's Josiah Dwight purchased about £1,000 worth of goods from Boston importers yearly.²⁷

The numerous wars fought in colonial America and abroad profoundly affected New England's shipbuilding and trade economy. According to British historian Patrick O'Brian, the establishment of colonies was not part of a long-term plan for the development of the British economy. Instead, income generated from colonial trade almost exclusively funded the armed forces of the Crown — the true symbol of a nation-state's wealth and prosperity.²⁸ Between the outbreak of King George's War in 1740 and the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the Massachusetts General Court and the province's merchants, sailors, and soldiers, under the tutelage of Governor William Shirley (1741-1756), vigorously pursued the British government's war policies.

War stimulated the colonial economy by increasing trade and investment, but war also meant a considerable loss of human lives. During this period, Massachusetts outspent Virginia, the second most zealous province, £818,000 to £385,000. The

²⁷ Labaree, 152-153.

²⁸ Patrick O' Brien, "Central government and the economy, 1688-1815," in Floud and McCloskey, 241.

campaigns against the French stronghold of Louisbourg in 1745 and the Crown Point campaign the following year were manned and supplied almost exclusively by Massachusetts Bay colonists, and until 1763, Massachusetts mustered 3,000 soldiers per year.²⁹ They fought not only within the colony, but in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Quebec, New York, and even as far away as Cuba.³⁰ When the English attacked the Spanish bastion of Cartagena, Massachusetts sent five hundred men, of whom all but fifty died, mostly from disease.³¹

It seems, however, that Britain could not control wartime shipping without private capital. The commercial wars against France and Spain were fought, in large measure, by privateers—ships authorized to attack enemy shipping and to bring them into port for sale.³² Between 1739 and 1748, more than 300 private men-of-war sloops and brigantines were equipped and manned in the British colonies.³³ Profitable returns were not uncommon. In 1749, 161 chests filled with 300,000 pieces of Spanish gold and silver were taken under armed guard from Edmund Quincy's wharf to his house.³⁴ At the end of the French and Indian War, a shrewd privateer like Hancock amassed profits that

²⁹ William Pencak, "Warfare and Political Change in Mid-Eighteenth Century Massachusetts," Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 8 (1980): 52.

³⁰ Labaree, 203.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

³² Nash, 101-104; Carl E. Swanson, Predators and Prizes: American Privateering and Imperial Warfare, 1729-1748 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

³³ Swanson, 223.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

exceeded £12,000.³⁵ Although the mortality rate aboard these vessels was high, privateering increased the demand for merchant seamen and their wages. By 1745, merchants were offering more than double prewar pay to seamen.³⁶

Yet war and the growth of trade and shipbuilding did nothing to stabilize the fluctuating value of Massachusetts' insufficient supply of currency. "That which hath kept this Town alive the last Year is the Number of Ships which have been Built in it," wrote Boston merchant John Coleman in 1720, "but that alone will not do; There must be something to Pass from Man to Man by way of exchange; It is vanity to talk that such a Town as this can subsist without Money or some other Medium of Exchange; You may as soon perswade [sic] me that People can live without Breathing, as without something to purchase their daily food."³⁷ As long as English policy prohibited the establishment of banks and corporations, there was no way for Bostonians to invest or exchange their currency securely.

Before 1740, the British government usually acknowledged the need for a colonial currency and acquiesced to colonial demands for bills of credit. In 1714 the Massachusetts General Court established a public land bank which authorized a loan to private borrowers on the security of mortgaged land. To meet war expenditures or

³⁵Nash, 103.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷John Coleman, The Distressed State of the Town of Boston. &c. Considered. In a Letter from a Gentleman in the Town. to his Friend in the Country (Boston: Benjamin Gray, 1720), reprinted in Bruchey, p. 84.

financial emergencies, colonial legislatures issued bills of credit to pay soldiers or purchase supplies. They printed bills of credit and lent them out at low interest rates, usually 5%, and retired these bills when borrowers repaid the government.³⁸ Despite their acceptance by merchants and colonial governments, these bills often created more problems than they solved. The value of each province's currency varied considerably and depreciating currency flooded markets throughout the colonies. Although the system worked for a time, provincial bills of credit could not keep pace with inflation in an increasingly complex market-based economy.

Although religious and ethnic differences divided merchants, intermarriage drew them together; and as a group, merchants exerted considerable political influence at both the town and provincial level. In 1733, the merchants of Boston's town council passed several reforms to regulate Boston's chaotic economy and local market structure. Although one pamphleteer condemned the proposals for market houses, citing their expense and their tendency to increase the cost of goods, three regulated markets opened for business in 1733; and in 1742, Peter Fanueil donated Fanueil Hall to serve as the town's market house.³⁹ A general overhaul of the Boston's local officials brought five new selectmen from the merchant class into town service, and selectmen also received approval for the election of tax collectors to put the town's finances in order.⁴⁰

³⁸Bruchey, 41-45.

³⁹ — "Some Considerations against the Setting up of a Market in this town . . ." (Boston, 1733); Lankevich, 18; Labaree, 164.

⁴⁰Warden, 109.

These reforms, however, did not increase the colonial money supply, and in 1733 colonists in Boston once again attempted to establish a bank to stabilize the value of their currency. Merchants in Boston created a Silver, or Merchant, Bank which issued £110,000 in bills redeemable in ten years in silver at 19 shillings per ounce. It was to be a sound alternative to the large amount of over-inflated currency (issued by Rhode Island particularly) which served only to devalue all colonial currency.⁴¹ But because colonists often hoarded such bills and took them out of circulation, their value soared out of reach for many Bostonians of average means.

In 1739, the financial situation of Boston reached a crisis when Massachusetts Governor Jonathan Belcher ordered the retirement of all outstanding public bills (old tenor) within two years, and limited further issues to about £30,000 (new tenor). But the new restrictions did not prohibit issues of private currency; and in 1740 nearly four hundred subscribers under the leadership of John Coleman sought a charter for a Land Bank which proposed to issue the equivalent of £600,000 (old tenor) worth of bills secured by the borrowers' land, to be repaid at 6% interest in bills, manufactured articles like hemp, bar iron, lumber, or produce. Two percent of the profits would fund private manufacturing, schools, and other public charities.⁴² Only by increasing the supply of

⁴¹ Hutchinson, 289; William Douglass, A Letter to a Merchant in London, concerning the late Combination in the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay in New England, to Impose or Force a private currency called Land-Bank-Money, (Boston, Thomas Fleet, 1741); Boston Gazette (Boston), 18 February 1733.

⁴² Boston Gazette (Boston) 2 Sept. 1740; 8 Sept. 1740; 14 Sept. 1740; 25 March 1741; 10 April 1741; 25 1741; Labaree, 165-166; Warden 124-126; Nash, 133-134.

bills of credit, wrote Coleman, could colonies establish domestic manufactories which “cannot be gone upon to any degree without Money or Bills, were there more Bills, enough would go on such Projects, Iron would soon grow cheaper, and Linnens and Woolens of our own make would grow more in use”⁴³ There was wide political support throughout the province among merchants, farmers, storekeeper, and professionals for a land bank. In 1741, only 11 of the 43 provincial deputies who opposed the bank were re-elected, while 33 of the 63 who supported it retained their seats.⁴⁴

According to Boston’s wealthiest merchants like Hutchinson, although a “few of rank and good estate” supported the land bank, it attracted the support of around 700 Bostonians, “generally of low condition among the plebeians and of small estate, and many of them insolvent.”⁴⁵ To counter the Land Bank, Boston merchants proposed issuing instead £120,000 in currency ultimately redeemable in silver. Supporters believed these bills were as good as stocks and company bonds in London because “the Signers . . . being our most eminent and wealthy Traders, are capable when required to call in and pay off all their Bills upon a short sight.”⁴⁶ Because silver was scarce, the plan attracted few supporters. In 1741, the Crown seemed to agree with Silver Bank

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Pencak, 57.

⁴⁵ Hutchinson, 299; for other opposition to paper money see William Douglass, A Summary, Historical and Political, of the British Settlements in North America, 2 vols. (Boston, 1755).

⁴⁶ Douglass, 6; Nash, 133-134.

supporters, and issued a declaration stating that the land bank “scheme tends to the defrauding of unthinking men of their substance and to create great interruption and confusion in business, as well to the traders there as in Great Britain.”⁴⁷ But both banks were illegal according to British law, and that same year Belcher ordered the Massachusetts legislature to close “by all legal means any other bank or project of the like nature that may be attempted to be set up on our said province of the Massachusetts Bay.”⁴⁸ Unfortunately, retrieving the bills already issued proved difficult.

Although all militia officers, Councilors, and province appointees who accepted Land Bank bills lost their jobs, support for the Land Bank remained, and various tradesmen and storekeepers continued to accept the Land Bank bills. In 1745, however, hard-money conservatives won a major victory under the leadership of Hutchinson. As Speaker of Massachusetts’ House of Representatives, Hutchinson devised a plan to use gold sent from the royal government to reimburse Massachusetts for the Louisbourg campaign to retire its inflated paper currency. But when Hutchinson’s resolution unexpectedly passed in 1746, mobs assaulted him with sticks.⁴⁹ After Parliament ordered demobilization of colonial troops in 1747, Massachusetts once again issued £3 million (old tenor) in paper currency and sent the value of Massachusetts’ currency plummeting.

⁴⁷“The Crown Instructs the Governor of Massachusetts Concerning Land Bank Schemes,” reprinted in Bruchey, 88.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Clifford K. Shipton, ed., Sibley’s Harvard Graduates: Biographical Sketches of those who attended Harvard College vol. VIII (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1751), 158.

In 1748, Parliament again granted Massachusetts £183,649 sterling to sink its currency.⁵⁰ Many, however, believed the silver would “fall to the share of men of wealth, and would either be exported or hoarded up, and no part of it would go to the laborer, or the lower class of people, who must take their pay in goods, or go without.”⁵¹ In 1749 fiscal conservatives like Hutchinson were not re-elected to the House.

But the fluctuating value and distribution of colonial currency were just part of Boston’s economic difficulties. While the end of wartime hostilities brought prosperity to New York and Philadelphia, in Boston, soaring taxes, disease, and inflation created an economic depression that began in the 1730s and did not abate until after the Revolution. The best evidence of Boston’s economic decline is found in the increasing amount of money spent on poor relief. A report of the town selectmen in early 1736 stated that poor relief expenditures rose from £944 in 1729 to £2,069 by 1734. Three years later they lamented to the General Court that “our Town-charges to the Poor this Year amounts to about £4,000.”⁵² But when adjusted for inflation and converted to English Sterling, the actual expenditures were £245 in 1729 and £760 in 1737.⁵³ In 1757, Boston’s overseers

⁵⁰Nash, 141.

⁵¹Hutchinson, History of Massachusetts, Vol. III, 8.

⁵²William H. Whitmore and others, ed., Reports of the Record Commissioner of Boston, hereafter referred to as BRC, 39 vols., (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill City Printers, 1885), 12:121-22, 178; 14: 13; Quoted in Nash, “Urban Wealth and Poverty in Prerevolutionary America,” 4 Journal of Interdisciplinary History (1976): 180.

⁵³Gary Nash, “Urban Wealth and Poverty in Pre-Revolutionary America,” in Nash, Race, Class, and Politics: Essays on American Colonial and Revolutionary Society (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 180.

estimated that "the poor supported either wholly or in part by the Town in the Alms-house and out of it will amount to the number of about 1000."⁵⁴ By 1760, the average annual expenditure for poor relief rose to £1,204 sterling.⁵⁵

Financing war expenditures caused tax rates to soar, and the succession of wars added hundreds of widows to the town's poor rolls, "of which at least half are very poor."⁵⁶ When the taxable polls fell from 3,395 in 1738 to about 2,400 in 1750, taxable Bostonians who paid an average of 20 shillings sterling annually from 1735 to 1739 paid nearly 50 shillings sterling annually fifteen years later.⁵⁷ Boston's leader tried appealing directly to the General Court for tax re-evaluation, lamenting in 1753 that "the poor tax in Boston is double if not more . . . than any town of its bigness upon the face of the . . . earth."⁵⁸ As tax rates increased, businessmen and merchants found they could flee to nearby towns and pay "a quarter or a fifth of what they pay . . . in Boston."⁵⁹ Those who remained were increasingly unable to pay even the smallest amount of taxes. When the town meeting petitioned for tax re-evaluation once again in 1756, the town had lost another 1,000 taxable males. While Boston's population stagnated at around 15,500

⁵⁴ BRC, 14: 302; Gary Nash, Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early North America (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1992), 218-219; Nash, "Urban Wealth and Poverty," 180.

⁵⁵ Nash, "Urban Wealth and Poverty," 181.

⁵⁶ Boston Gazette (Boston) 27 August 1951; Nash, Urban Crucible, 106.

⁵⁷ Nash, The Urban Crucible, 106.

⁵⁸ BRC, 14:238-40.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

before the Revolution, New York's population rose to 18,000 and Philadelphia's to 23,750.⁶⁰ In 1756, fewer than 2,100 of the town's inhabitants were paying taxes, whereas 4,000 inhabitants were taxable ten years earlier. When the longest epidemic of smallpox in Boston's history struck between January and August of 1752, the town's selectmen reported that 514 of the 5,544 cases died, and approximately 1,850 inhabitants fled the town, many of whom never returned.⁶¹ Even the General Court was forced to retire to Concord. In 1753, the Boston town meeting estimated the cost of treatment at more than £12,000.⁶²

When skilled tradesmen fled the town's diseases and high taxes, Boston's industries went with them. Baking declined by two-thirds, as did the cooperage and fishing industries. "As to the distillery," a 1753 town meeting petition to the General Court declared, "six are wholly unoccupied and there is not one in town fully and steadily employed . . . owing to the great increase in still houses" in Rhode Island. Joseph Belknap, a leather processor whose yard employed approximately 50 men, stated in a 1755 report to the General Court that between 1746 and 1748 there "were yearly dressed in this town at least 30,000 skins . . . into leather, [but] for several years past there has not been dressed . . . 6,000 skins into wash leather yearly."⁶³

⁶⁰Bruchey, 11.

⁶¹Nash, The Urban Crucible, 106; Lankevich, 20.

⁶²BRC, 14:227.

⁶³Quoted in Eric G. Nellis, "Misreading the Signs: Industrial Imitation, Poverty, and the Social Order in Colonial Boston," The New England Quarterly 59 (1986): 499.

Shipbuilding, the foundation of Boston's economy, declined sharply as satellite ports such as Newbury rose in importance. In 1749, only fifteen ships were built in Boston and by 1753, the town produced only one-quarter of the region's shipping vessels. Citing peace and departing capital, Benjamin Hallowell reported that the number of shipbuilders declined from 18 in 1747 to only 9 in 1756.⁶⁴ As Boston's major industries disappeared and the hyperinflation of Massachusetts' currency continued, laborer and artisan wages plummeted. Wages for mariners, which reached 90 shillings per month in 1746, fell to 42 shillings per month by 1754.⁶⁵ To make the situation worse, the sterling value of Massachusetts currency fell to less than one-tenth of its face value by 1750. In 1740, a penny bought six ounces of bread for a household, but by 1749, a penny hardly bought an ounce.⁶⁶ Clearly the benefits of war and maritime trade were distributed unevenly in mid-eighteenth century Boston. By examining Boston's tax lists, probate records, and inventories of estates from 1684-1775, Gary Nash concluded that by mid-eighteenth century, the wealthiest ten percent of the population controlled 64% of the town's taxable wealth.⁶⁷

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Nash., The Urban Crucible, 106-107, 113.

⁶⁶Ibid., 106-107.

⁶⁷Gary Nash, "The Social Evolution of Preindustrial American Cities, 1700-1820: Reflections and New Directions," Journal of Urban History 13 (1987): 128 (table 3); see also James Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," William and Mary Quarterly 22 (1965): 75-92; Alan Kulikoff, "The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston," William and Mary Quarterly 28 (1971): 375-412.

The economic situation for many rural regions in Massachusetts was no better. Throughout the eighteenth century, land in rural regions was becoming increasingly scarce. In Dedham, Massachusetts, the town proprietors divided the last remaining common lands as early as 1713. The number of men in Dedham with no taxable land increased from less than 5% in 1700 to 12 % in 1736.⁶⁸ In his examination of 90 families in Plymouth Colony, John Demos found a rapidly changing rural world in which families moved frequently and land changed hands often.⁶⁹ As early as 1721, "Amicus Patriae" observed that "many of our old towns are too full of inhabitants for husbandry; many of them living upon small shares of land And also many of our people are slow in marrying for want of settlement."⁷⁰ By the late eighteenth century, the average holding of land per person in New England was only 40 acres.⁷¹

It is clear that on the eve of the American Revolution, colonial Boston faced insurmountable economic problems. To grapple with these economic difficulties, Boston's elite created an institution compatible with the expansion of the market economy. The wealthy merchants who organized the SEIEP believed the establishment of a linen manufactory would decrease importation of linens and help stabilize the town's

⁶⁸Kenneth Lockridge, "Land, Population and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630-1790; and an Afterthought," in Stanley Katz, Colonial America: Essays in Politics and Social Development (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 475.

⁶⁹John Demos, "Notes on Life in Plymouth Colony," William and Mary Quarterly 22 (1965): 264-286.

⁷⁰Quoted in Lockridge, 467.

⁷¹Ibid.

economy. "In the Present State of this Province, We are not perhaps in a condition to greatly enlarge our Exports," declared the SEIEP's 1751 promotional pamphlet.⁷² A better solution, the SEIEP's subscribers believed, was establishing a linen manufactory that could keep the £50,000 colonists paid annually to English merchants for English, Irish, Dutch and German linens in the colonies.⁷³ Although the SEIEP certainly was not an attempt to procure profit, its supporters clearly understood that survival and prosperity in a colonial city depended upon a favorable balance of trade that did not exist in colonial New England. The establishment of the SEIEP was just one of the solutions Boston's merchants tried to regulate Boston's chaotic economy and ease its trade imbalance with Britain. But "the most immediate Advantage," of the manufactory, the SEIEP promotional pamphlet declared, was that "the Poor will be decently cloth'd, and fed with the fruit of their own Diligence: the Publik Taxes abated; and in general a Spirit of Frugality, Industry and Virtue will probably take place among us."⁷⁴

According to historian Gary Nash, the establishment of the SEIEP represents the abandonment of the ideology of the corporate community in favor of the individualistic, acquisitive values which industrialization and a growing capitalist economy required.⁷⁵

⁷²The Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor... Articles of Incorporation... with a List of Subscribers (Boston, 1748, reprint 1754), 1.

⁷³Ibid., 2.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Gary Nash, "The Failure of Female Factory Labor in Colonial Boston," Labor History 20 (1979): 165-188.

The colonial elite no longer felt an obligation to provide for its poor as it had in a earlier era. But such a conclusion is misleading. It is true that the ministers of Boston's wealthiest churches like Samuel Cooper and Charles Chauncy no longer used their pulpits to criticize merchants who "overreach others, because they find them ignorant, or screw grievously upon them, only because they are poor and low, and in great necessities."⁷⁶ It was these merchants who filled their churches pews; and it was these merchants who paid the ministers' salaries. But Boston's merchants were not abandoning their traditional role as providers of poor relief by exploiting the labor of Boston's most destitute citizens for profit. Instead, they founded the SEIEP on traditional views of poverty and poor relief established in seventeenth-century England.

⁷⁶Cotton Mather, Theopolis Americana (Boston, 1710), 4.

CHAPTER TWO

POOR RELIEF IN COLONIAL BOSTON

The image of America as a land of abundant opportunity for the diligent and frugal shines brightly in the hearts and minds of many Americans. No one personifies this image better than Benjamin Franklin, whose rags-to-riches life story proved that America was indeed the "best poor man's country." Today, historians continue to substantiate Franklin's observation of life in colonial America. By examining probate records in southern New England, Jackson Turner Main found that although poverty existed in the colonies, the opportunity for upward mobility and a rising standard of living ameliorated class conflict.¹ But probate records and the price of consumer goods can uncover nothing about how groups contended for power as labor and work patterns changed.

In recent years, labor historians have debunked the myth that Benjamin Franklin created 250 years ago by addressing the existence of both class conflict and abject poverty in colonial America. According to Howard Rock, the decline of craft labor and the rise of wage labor following the American Revolution lowered the status of artisans, commodified workers' skills, and decreased workers' independence.² Historian Sean

¹Jackson Turner Main, The Social Structure of Revolutionary America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); see also Gloria L. Main, "The Standard of Living in Southern New England, 1640-1773," William and Mary Quarterly 45 (1988): 124-134.

² Howard B. Rock, Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson (New York: New York University Press, 1979).

Wilentz argued that working-class laborers regained some lost political power by transforming Republican ideology into a unique working-class consciousness. Laborers defined associations like the Mechanical Society, and political organizations like the Sons of Liberty and the Whig club, using Jeffersonian ideals of commonwealth, virtue, independence, and citizenship.³ Yet despite workers' ability to maintain the ideals of equality and prosperity in their political language, the poorer classes continued to lose political and economic power as capitalism and the market economy expanded. In The Road to Mobocracy, Paul Gilje described how mob action and riots lost their legitimacy as a communal form of political expression when animosity between classes grew.⁴ The French Revolution, ethnic divisions (as immigration and black migration increased), and labor unrest led the middle and upper classes to suppress riots by establishing a police force which would eventually undermine working-class political authority.⁵

Other historians have examined changing attitudes toward poor relief to explain the changes that industrialization and urbanization brought to the new republic. According to Raymond Mohl, urbanization and social confusion weakened the integration and control

³ Sean Wilentz, Chantz Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); for other studies of working-class Republicanism see Charles G. Steffen, The Mechanics of Baltimore: Workers and Politics in the Age of Revolution, 1763-1812 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Paul Gilje and Howard Rock, Keepers of the Revolution: New Yorkers at Work in the Early Republic (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁴ Paul A. Gilje, The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987); for further discussions of riots and political power see Pauline Maier "Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America," William and Mary Quarterly 27 (1970): 3-35.

⁵ Ibid.

family and church traditionally provided communities. With these changes, the blame and responsibility for poverty and poor relief no longer rested upon the shoulders of the community, but upon the impoverished themselves. City and state reformers' programs to educate and improve the condition of the poor failed because their policies of indoor and outdoor relief did not address the true causes of increasing poverty and social disorder — urbanization and capitalism.⁶ A similar cycle emerged in Philadelphia where, according to John K. Alexander, a growing fear of social disorder following the Revolution transformed public and private charity into instruments of social control and oppression.⁷

Without denying the benevolent motivations of reformers, David J. Rothman argued that the desire for social control culminated in the expansion of the asylum's role in Jacksonian America.⁸ The strength of family and community in colonial America kept crime under control and poor relief costs minimal. Because the poor were cared for by family members and the church, few were sent to the almshouse or the workhouse. It was only when industrialization and urbanization undermined the authority of community, church, and family that Americans built prisons, orphanages, workhouses, and hospitals to restore social order. "The good order of the asylum," Rothman reasoned, "its routine

⁶Raymond Mohl, Poverty in New York (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁷John K. Alexander, Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1980).

⁸David J. Rothman, The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971).

of punctuality and steady labor, would act as both a cure and a preventative,” to the upheaval industrialization and capitalization brought to American society.⁹

Although Rothman’s argument is convincing, he mistakenly describes colonial America as an unchanging place where “the existence of poverty,” was accepted “with great equanimity.”¹⁰ The presence of poverty in colonial America was not accepted with ease and resignation in urban centers like Boston. Amidst urban diseases, fires, and riots, colonists in Boston created successful and unsuccessful poor-relief institutions to keep out undesirable strangers, feed the hungry, and employ the idle. But the community that created these institutions should not be simplified or idealized. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the colonial community was governed by not only the influence of the family and church, but also by public institutions such as the almshouse and the workhouse. From the first livestock set aside for the poor to the creation of the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor in 1748, the ideal of Christian benevolence and duty dictated that a community provide for its impoverished. But how communities like Boston fulfilled their obligation to the poor in the colonial period is a story of both continuity and change.

The history of outdoor poor relief in colonial Massachusetts begins when James Sherly, secretary for the Merchant Adventurers, sent the inhabitants of Plymouth Colony

⁹Ibid., xxx.

¹⁰Ibid., 3.

a red heifer "to begin a stock for the poor."¹¹ The legal precedent for colonial methods of poor relief, however, was set in seventeenth-century England by the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601. The law established the disbursement of poor relief in the hands of local civil authorities. The parish was to distribute poor relief through church wardens and a small number of wealthy individuals appointed annually by the justices of the peace who would serve as both overseers of the poor and as revenue collectors. Funds for carrying out the act were raised by taxing every householder in the parish, with the threat of imprisonment for those unwilling to pay. Although the statute recognized the existence of involuntary unemployment and established the individual's right to poor relief, the measure also stated that vagrants refusing to work could be committed to a house of correction, whipped, branded, or even put to death.¹²

As settlement of the colonies increased, colonists in Massachusetts adopted the tenets of the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 almost verbatim. As in England, the Town Act of 1635 placed the responsibility of poor relief in the hands of local officials in the Bay Colony.¹³ In 1642, a law passed in Plymouth Colony declared that every town should maintain their poor "according as they shall fynd most convenyent and suitable for themselves by an order and general agreement in a publike town meeting."¹⁴ American

¹¹Charles E. Lee, "Public Poor Relief and the Massachusetts Community, 1620-1715," New England Quarterly 55 (1982): 564.

¹²Lee, 564; Walter Trattner, From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 10-12.

¹³Ibid., 566.

¹⁴Quoted in Marcus W. Jernegen, Laboring and Dependent Classes in Colonial America, 1607-1783 (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1931), 195.

colonists also recognized that every town's inhabitants possessed the right to be supported by the town if they became destitute.¹⁵ But with that right came a responsibility for good conduct and support of the community; and usually only those persons with family connections, money to purchase land, or services to offer were admitted as inhabitants. At first colonial towns did not admit inhabitants unless an allotment of land could be provided. Later, as settlement increased, one could be admitted by purchasing land.¹⁶ Because towns admitted inhabitants only under certain conditions, colonists were not allowed to sell land without the consent of the town proprietors.¹⁷

If, as historian Sam Bass Warner argues, "the test of a successful city is . . . the manner in which it treats strangers," then colonial towns like Boston certainly fail.¹⁸ Colonial laws required that towns must provide for their poor, but towns kept out strangers they did not wish to help. In 1637 the General Court ordered that no town or person could "receive any stranger . . . [with] intent to reside" in the colony for more than three weeks except by permission of the Council.¹⁹ When "entertaining" visitors became

¹⁵Josiah H. Benton, Warning Out in New England (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 1-10.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Benton, 19.

¹⁸Sam Bass Warner, The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), xxiv.

¹⁹Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England (Boston: W. White, 1853), I: 264.; Lee, 571; Douglass Lamar Jones, "The Transformation of the Law of Poverty in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts 62 (1984): 156.

a problem, the province enacted statutes stating that transients could not remain in a town longer than twenty days without permission from the selectmen. Inhabitants were obliged to supply written descriptions of the visitor's circumstances to the selectmen or pay a fine of forty shillings a week, of which half was to be used for poor relief.²⁰

Town officials closely scrutinized the circumstances and health of immigrants from overseas upon their arrival. The sea was watched by a special official who warned away newcomers who appeared likely to become town charges.²¹ A 1723 settlement law established immigrants' port of entry as their legal residence. But to protect the seaports from excessive poor relief costs, the law required ship masters to provide the selectmen with a list of passengers, their circumstances, and a bond for those likely to become chargeable or else transport them out of the province.²² In 1744, Captain Jefferys from London was informed to report to Boston selectmen "to give Security for some Passengers he brought in his ship."²³ When Boston selectmen discovered that "Capt. Cunningham imported Ann Holden into this town from Ireland & that She is now at her House big with Child and hath brought nothing with her," Cunningham was prosecuted

²⁰Shurtleff, I: 196; J.H. Clifford and others eds., Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay (Boston, 1869-1922), II: 616, 835-836, 994-995; Jernegen, 192; Jones, "Transformation of the Law of Poverty," 174-175.

²¹ Trattner, 19.

²²Jernegen, 206; Jones, "Transformation of the Law of Poverty," 174-175.

²³BRC, 14: 89.

“for not giving Bond to indemnify the Town from any Charge upon her Acco. as the Law directs Except he do the same forthwith.”²⁴

Another reason for the close supervision of arriving vessels was the fear of contagious diseases. Ships arriving in Boston were often kept quarantined off shore at Castle or Spectacle Island if they were suspected of carrying immigrants infected with diseases like smallpox.²⁵ Those that violated a ship’s quarantine were swiftly punished. In January of 1744, Mr. Hallowell was prosecuted for “coming out of the ship Molineaux . . . without Leave from the Select men” because the ship brought smallpox into the town.²⁶ Ship captains were also required to post bonds for sick mariners left in port.²⁷ Besides ship masters, anyone who brought into the colony a sick pauper from a foreign country was required to maintain the person at their personal expense.²⁸

Migration from rural regions of Massachusetts also presented a problem for Boston’s selectmen. As land became increasingly scarce in colonial America, mobility increased in Massachusetts and between 1740 and 1750 the number of transient households increased by as much as 76 %, and as much as 248 % between 1750 and 1760. By 1771,

²⁴Ibid., 14: 19.

²⁵Ibid., 14: 38 Charles Bridenbaugh, Cities in the Wilderness: Urban Life in America, 1625-1742 (New York: Knopf, 1938, reprint 1955), 399-407;

²⁶BRC, 14: 94.

²⁷Acts and Resolves, II: 244-245; Jones, “Transformation of the Law of Poverty,” 174; Jernejen, 192; Trattner, 19-20.

²⁸Jernejen, 192.

nearly a third of the adult male population was propertyless in many communities.²⁹

Settlement laws in Massachusetts established a system of warning out to keep out keep poor relief costs at a minimum when refugees poured into Boston in 1675 following King Phillip's War. Although migrants could vote, hold office and pay taxes, once an individual was warned out, or informed they must leave, the town was relieved of any financial obligation to provide the immigrants poor relief.

As the Poor Law of 1659 states, only those who lived in a town for three months or more were entitled to poor relief. If before that time an individual or family was warned out, the town was relieved of any obligation to provide poor relief.³⁰ Establishing residency became even more difficult after 1692 when the General Court passed an act which required persons to be warned out within three months.³¹ Warning out could be avoided only by election or admission by town vote or by becoming a settled minister. In 1700, when immigrants and migrants once again flooded seaport towns like Boston, the General Court extended the residency requirement to one year.³² Although the number of persons warned out each year varied considerably, overseers were usually diligent in

²⁹ Douglass Lamar Jones, "The Strolling Poor: Transiency in Eighteenth Century Massachusetts," Journal of Social History (1975): 28-54; Jackson Turner Main, The Social Structure of Revolutionary America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 7-43.

³⁰ Benton, chapter 1; Jernegen, 192.

³¹ Benton, 116.

³² Clifford, Acts and Resolves, I: 64-68; Benton, 100; Sheila Anne Culbert, "Sturdy Beggars and the Worthy Poor: Poverty in Massachusetts, 1750-1820," (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University) 1985, 72.

fulfilling their duties.³³ From 1721 to 1742, an average of 25 persons per year were warned out of the town. From 1745 to 1764, the number climbed to 65 per year. Between 1753 and 1764 that number tripled to about 200 persons per year.³⁴

Although historians claim that a resident could remain upon being warned out, many were informed specifically to leave town. In 1743, "Scipio a negro and his Wife" from Dedham, Massachusetts were "Warned to depart the Town as the Law directs."³⁵ In 1744, "James Goudy & Sarah his Wife from Medford" were warned to depart the town in fourteen days "or give Security to the satisfaction of the Selectmen to save the Town harmless as the law directs."³⁶ Occasionally, selectmen in Boston would provide funds for the removal of unwelcome indigents. On November 16, 1743, twenty-five pounds old tenor was given to Thomas Hutchinson "in order to Transport Jeremiah Jones an Indigent Person out of the Province."³⁷ In 1744 Thomas Hancock agreed to pay twenty pounds old tenor to transport "Robert Saco & Dilly his Wife, Two Free Negroes being Aged & Infirm" to the island of Jamaica with Captain Thomas Paine.³⁸

³³Stephen Wiberly, "Four Cities: Public Poor Relief in Urban America, 1700-1775," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1975), 47; Allan Kulikoff, "The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston," William and Mary Quarterly, 28 (1971): 400.

³⁴Nash, "Urban Wealth and Poverty," 185.

³⁵William H. Whitmore and others, eds., Reports of the Record Commissioner of Boston, hereafter referred to as BRC (Boston, 1885), 14: 49.

³⁶Ibid., 14: 64.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

It was the responsibility of the overseers of the poor to decide who received public relief and who was warned out of town. As early as 1641, the Massachusetts General Court recognized the authority of each town's selectmen. But it was the Second Charter of Massachusetts, in 1692, that gave freeholders, and other inhabitants of the towns ratable at twenty pounds estate, the right to assemble yearly and choose overseers of the poor who would distribute poor relief and admit new residents.³⁹ The life and deeds of Daniel Oliver, Brother-in-Law to Governor Belcher, exemplifies the obligations and expectations of an overseer's life. "Religious, serious countenance, sincere heart, cautious speech, conscientious Justice and Integrity, a peaceable and Publick Spirit, an abounding Charity, a perpetual Diligence, an exact Oeconomy, A mind above Earthly Pomps and Pleasures," Oliver possessed, "In short all the virtues that form an eminent Christian."⁴⁰ Oliver visited the poor in times of sickness, established a spinning school for the poor, and "doubtless bestowed numberless Charities of his own upon them, which God and his Angels have only seen."⁴¹

Overseers did not work alone, and often they appointed individuals, usually constables, to scour the town in search of potential chargeables. In 1743, Joseph Lasinby was appointed by Boston selectmen "to make diligent search" of strangers for three

³⁹Kenneth A. Lockridge and Alan Kreider, "The Evolution of Massachusetts Town Government, 1640-1740" William and Mary Quarterly 23 (1966): 552; Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, A Topographical and Historical Description of Boston (Boston: Alfred Mudge and Son, 1871), 128.

⁴⁰Thomas Prince, The Faithful Servant Approv'd at Death and Entering into the Joy of his Lord, (Boston, 1732), 31.

⁴¹Ibid.

months and “[o]nce a Week, inform the Select men of the same & return a List of all such persons.”⁴² In 1744, Dean William Larrabee was given £100 old tenor “for his trouble in Visiting such Houses as Entertain Inmates or Strangers & acquainting the Select men therewith.”⁴³

Overseers decided what type of public poor relief an individual received by how an individual or family fell into destitution. Like the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601, New England’s poor laws distinguished between those who could not earn enough to live on and the idle poor — individuals able to work, but unwilling to work.⁴⁴ Puritan ministers declared charity, which “enobles our nature, by conforming us to the best, the most glorious patterns,” the highest Christian virtue.⁴⁵ “Benevolence,” wrote Samuel Cooper, “is the Cement and Support — of Families — of Churches — of States and Kingdoms — and of the great Community of Mankind.”⁴⁶ To keep their communities models of Christian piety, colonists willingly provided relief to poor orphans, widows, deserted mothers, and men incapacitated by sickness or age if no family members could be found to support the individual or family.

⁴²BRC, 14: 36.

⁴³BRC, 14: 56.

⁴⁴For discussion of Puritan attitudes toward poverty see Stephen Foster, Their Solitary Way: The Puritan Social Ethic in the First Century of Settlement in New England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), chapter 5; Culbert “Sturdy Beggars and Worthy Poor,” chapters 1-3.

⁴⁵Samuel Cooper, A Sermon Preached in Boston Before the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor (Boston, 1753), 20.

⁴⁶Ibid., 12.

The first institution established specifically to house and employ the sick, old, and disabled in colonial America was built in Boston as early as 1660. That year, Boston's selectmen made plans to build an almshouse for the town's worthy poor. In 1662, the almshouse was finally built, using Henry Webb's £100 donation to the poor and Robert Keayne's £120 legacy for the poor.⁴⁷ Although historians argue that the almshouse was merely an extension of the family, it seems more likely that the almshouse served as a house of correction where the poor, sick, and criminal lived together. At least one observer believed its living conditions prevented "many Honest Poor People going there for the designed Relief and Support."⁴⁸ It was only poor immigrants like "John Heaton a Sailor & Mary Spencer a Woman from albany being strangers & both Sick & having nothing to Support themselves," who were sent to the almshouse at the expense of the province.⁴⁹ Despite miserable and unsanitary conditions, by 1742 the rebuilt almshouse's thirty-three rooms housed at least 110 persons out of a population of 17,756.⁵⁰

But charity for those whose poverty stemmed from idleness, intemperance, or extravagance were treated with less benevolence.⁵¹ "As for your Common Beggar,"

⁴⁷Lee, 575.

⁴⁸Quoted in Jernegen, 201-202.

⁴⁹BRC, 14: 27; Provincial authorities in Massachusetts began providing poor relief when Boston authorities appealed to the General Court for funds at the end of King Phillip's War. In 1701, local communities were also reimbursed by the colonial treasury for the relief of transients with contagious diseases (See Trattner, 20-21).

⁵⁰Towner, 424.

⁵¹Benjamin Wadsworth, Vicious Courses, Procuring Poverty. Described and Condem'd, (Boston, 1718; repr., Boston, 1744), 4-34.

wrote Cotton Mather, "tis usually an Injury and a Dishonour unto the Country, for them to be countenanced; as for those that Indulge themselves in Idleness, the Express Command of God unto us, is That you should let them Starve."⁵² According to Boston minister Samuel Cooper "Idleness will either totally destroy a Community; or keep it forever poor and low; and render the fairest Advantages of Nature, the most extensive Bounties of Providence, altogether useless. . . . How charitable then is their Design who endeavor to banish this Foe to public Happiness; and to introduce *Industry* in it's [sic] stead."⁵³ Charles Chauncy, minister of Boston's First Church, proclaimed that "whenever persons are idle, they are disorderly: For an idle Life is, in the whole of it, a disorder," because "[i]t subverts the Order God has establishe'd for the Support of Mankind ..."⁵⁴

In an act of 1699, the General Court decreed that the selectmen of each town were to establish a house of correction designed for "Suppressing and Punishing of Rogues, Vagabonds, Common Beggars, and other Lewd, Idle and Disorderly Persons; and also for setting the Poor to Work."⁵⁵ In 1735 the Massachusetts General Court passed a special law for Boston that permitted town authorities to construct a workhouse to separate the

⁵²Cotton Mather, Durable Riches (Boston, 1695), 20.

⁵³Cooper, A Sermon Preached In Boston, 27

⁵⁴ Charles Chauncy, The Idle Poor Secluded from the Bread of Charity by the Christian Law (Boston, 1753), 12.

⁵⁵Jernegen, 202-203; Albert Bushnell Hart, A Commonwealth History of Massachusetts, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1927, reprint 1966), 266-167.

idle, criminal and worthy poor.⁵⁶ At the Boston workhouse, the town's growing number of able-bodied, or "idle", poor lived and worked spinning, carding, and picking oakum. Support for the project was so widespread that overseers of the poor raised £3,600 by private subscription from 121 donors to pay for the project. When that amount proved insufficient, another £729 was raised from contributions and the town provided another £377 to complete the building.⁵⁷

Overseers, not selectmen, were given authority to supervise the workhouse and punish those who violated the rules and routine of the workhouse. The General Court increased the number of wards in Boston from nine to twelve, with one overseer assigned to each ward and gave overseers sole authority to warn out intruders, admit inmates, and enact town laws to regulate the workhouse. Overseers were also to apprentice poor children from the almshouse and workhouse who "do not know, or are not able to distinguish the Alphabet or twenty-four [sic] Letters at the Age of six years."⁵⁸

Although some historians believe that the establishment of indoor poor relief represents acceptance of the idea of involuntary poverty, the regimented and rigorous routine of the workhouse suggests instead that colonists categorized workhouse inmates as the idle poor.⁵⁹ No one was admitted or released without permission from the

⁵⁶BRC, 12: 110-111.

⁵⁷BRC, 12: 181-83, 248; Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor, "An Act for employing and providing for the Poor of the Town of Boston, 1735," reel 13, Massachusetts Historical Society. Foster 146-147; Towner "Transformation of the Law of Poverty," 166-167; Bridenbaugh, 393.

⁵⁸BRC, 12: 131-133, 181-83; Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor, "An Act for Employing . . ."

workhouse master. For minor infractions of workhouse rules, inmates might be denied a meal or a day's food allowance. But for serious infractions, such as an attempted escape, the master of the workhouse was authorized to attach a wooden clog to the inmate's leg.⁶⁰ Apparently, the rigorous regulations of the workhouse and its routine kept out potential inmates. By 1741 the two stories high, 140 feet long building held a total of only fifty-five persons, only ten of them adult males.⁶¹

By mid-eighteenth century, war, currency shortages, immigration, and migration continued to pose significant challenges to Boston's overburdened system of poor relief. Although the ideals of compassion and Christian benevolence dictated that the community provide for the town's impoverished, the cost of providing indoor and outdoor relief for the town's poor became increasingly difficult as Boston fell into economic decline. A better solution to the problems of economic decline and uncertainty, as well as the rising cost of poor relief, many believed, was a voluntary society called the United Society for Manufactures and Importation in 1748, later renamed the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor (SEIEP) in 1753. It was to be a linen manufactory which employed spinners and weavers in one building. With its establishment, its supporters promised that "[a] door will be opened to let all our Poor into employment"⁶² The manufactory would ease the economic woes of Boston's

⁵⁹Foster, 147; For a discussion outlining the establishment of Boston's ward system in the colonial period, see Shurtleff, A Topographical Description of Boston, 129-136.

⁶⁰Jones, "Transformation of the Law of Poverty," 168-169; Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor, "An Act"

⁶¹Foster, 148.

taxpayers by increasing exports and employing the town's poor. "It will," its promotional pamphlet declared, "soon add a new Branch of Riches to the Province, will clothe the Naked, find Bread for the Hungry, and employment for the idle."⁶³

According to Gary Nash, the society was America's first experiment in factory production, and represents a shift in American attitudes toward both poverty and poor relief. Merchants and ministers, Nash argues, turned from the benevolent desire to help the poor to the idea that the poor should help themselves.⁶⁴ Although its founders were not abandoning the notion of benevolent Christianity, the self-interest of its founders is undeniable. Even Boston's most prominent ministers supported the self-interest of the SEIEP's founders. "For Self-Love," Brattle Street Church's Samuel Cooper told SEIEP supporters, "is at least as necessary to the Support and Happiness of the World as Social."⁶⁵ The charitable Christian in the eighteenth century, Cooper continued, "forms Designs of enlarging the Wealth and Power of his Country, by enlarging it's [sic] Commerce; by removing what obstructs its old Channels, and pointing out new ones; and by introducing and encouraging the most useful Arts and Manufactures."⁶⁶

⁶²Charles Chauncy, Industry and Frugality Proposed as the Surest Means to make Us a Rich and Flourishing People: And the Linen Manufacture Recommended As tending to Promote These among Us (Boston, 1753), 10.

⁶³The Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor . . . Articles of Incorporation . . . with a List of Subscribers (Boston, 1748, reprint 1754), 3.

⁶⁴Gary Nash, "The Failure of Female Factory Labor in Colonial Boston," Labor History 20 (1979): 169.

⁶⁵Samuel Cooper, A Sermon Preached in Boston, 2.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 7.

The weaving and spinning of linen seemed the perfect solution to the town's economic difficulties and the perceived idleness of its impoverished inhabitants. Flax grew well in the northern colonies, and since the late seventeenth century weaving linen was known as a way to cure urban poverty.⁶⁷ The best example of what establishing a linen manufactory could do for a community was set in Ireland in the 1740s by Sir Richard Cox. To boost enthusiasm for the project, the Society published a lengthy published letter entitled A Letter from Sir Richard Cox, Bart. To Thomas Prior, Esq.: Shewing from Experience a sure Method to establish the Linnen-Manufacture, and the Beneficial Effects it will immediately produce. Sent to Boston by Benjamin Franklin, the letter outlined a rather extraordinary tale of a town's recovery from the brink of disaster thanks to the establishment of a linen manufactory. "The circumstances of this Province and those of Ireland," wrote the society's founders, "though not altogether similar, are in so many aspects alike that the publication of this letter here, cannot be charged with any impropriety."⁶⁸

Sir Richard was the grandson of the former Lord Chancellor of Ireland and his tract described a fifteen-year experiment to eradicate poverty on the land he inherited on the River Bandon where the towns of Kinsale and Bandon-bridge met. Cox was horrified to find the natives of his inherited estate roaming the streets, living in broken-down houses, and reveling in a "Habit of Idleness."⁶⁹ To remedy the problem, Cox turned the tiny town

⁶⁷Nash 168-169.

⁶⁸Letter from Sir Richard Cox . . ., (Boston, 1750), 4.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 7.

into a model of human motivation and industry. Integrating disparate elements of linen production into a single operation, Cox employed entire families in the production of linen. To prevent poor men from indulging in their "notorious habits," Cox paid his employees with food and clothing, and applied production goals and rewards to encourage competition among workers.⁷⁰ Cox's experiment seemed to prove that a rational solution for economic depression and poverty existed, and the founders of the SEIEP were quick to adopt his strategy.

The degree of professional organization of the SEIEP was impressive. Committees were convened and a board of directors was formed "for inspecting the works to give suitable directions for the various parts of this manufacture and those who are employed in it."⁷¹ The company gave flax to spinners and brought the yarn from the spinners to weavers in the manufactory house. Private citizens also sent yarn there for weaving.⁷² Because finding able spinners was difficult, the society also established a spinning school where children "may be taught gratis and it is hoped, that all Well-wishers to their Country, will send their children that are suitable . . . to learn the useful and necessary Art of Spinning."⁷³ Boston's newspapers wrote glowing reports of the manufactory's progress, and the societal benefits of raising flax and weaving linen.⁷⁴

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹ "Rules of Incorporation for the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor (Boston, 1754), 7.

⁷²Boston Evening Post (Boston), 19 February 1753; Wiberly, 99-100.

⁷³Ibid., December 10, 1750.

⁷⁴Ibid., February 19, 1753, February 26, 1753, April 30, 1753.

The manufactory would not only increase exports, reduce imports, and decrease the cost of poor relief, it would “employ our own women and children who are now in a great measure idle.”⁷⁵ The founders of the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor, many of whom were wealthy overseers of the poor, recognized poor women and children as an available source of cheap labor because women and children were the most common recipients of indoor poor relief. Between 1759 and 1775, 63% of the inmates admitted to the Boston almshouse were women.⁷⁶ In a seaport town where laboring men left home seeking employment as sailors and soldiers, poor women were often left to survive alone when husbands abandoned them or died. In 1742, a census of Boston’s selectmen complained that the town contained approximately 1200 widows “[o]ne Thousand whereof are in low Circumstances.”⁷⁷ Abandoned women like Mary Ray, “a soldier’s Wife & her female child Ann” were common almshouse inmates.⁷⁸ Although many of these women were married, many were not. Single pregnant women like Katharine Briant (alias Kennis Lattaree), a single woman from Philadelphia who “brought nothing with her & is big with Child by James Chambers” and Katharine Drisdell, “a Woman big with child & in Travail” who lived in Boston for eleven months were common Almshouse inmates.⁷⁹

⁷⁵The Society for Encouraging Industry, 1.

⁷⁶Wiberly, 27, 98.

⁷⁷ BRC: 14: 369-370.

⁷⁸Ibid., 14: 221.

⁷⁹Ibid., 14: 38, 46.

Some historians have argued that manufacturing schemes to employ the poor are examples of the higher value of laboring women's work in the preindustrial period. Even prostitutes, despite their fallen state, were suitable candidates for work in a manufactory in England, Deborah Valenze argued.⁸⁰ It is likely that schemes like the SEIEP were earnest attempts to reduce idleness and the cost of public poor relief, as their supporters claimed. Yet historically, these manufactories did not pay women enough on which to live. They were intended only to supplement poor women's ad-hoc methods of survival. Thomas Firmin reasoned that spinning gave "a poor Woman that goes three dayes [sic] a Week to Wash or Scoure [sic] abroad, or one that is employed in Nurse-Keeping three or four Months in a Year, or a poor Market-woman, who attends three of four Mornings in a Week with her Basket," productive work to fill her idle days.⁸¹ "By means of this spinning," Firmin wrote, poor women were not only kept off the streets begging, "but made much more happy and cheerful."⁸² The SEIEP, like its predecessors, may have reduced the idleness of female workers, but it paid meager wages of only seven shillings per month.⁸³ With basic food costs at approximately nine shillings per month, the SEIEP's wages were not enough on which a woman and her children could survive.⁸⁴

⁸⁰Deborah Valenze, The First Industrial Woman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13-28.

⁸¹Alice Clark, Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1919), 135.

⁸²Ibid., 135.

⁸³Ibid., 183-184.

⁸⁴Wiberly, Chapter 5.

But the benefits of the SEIEP extended far beyond the employment of poor women without economic resources. The perceived idleness of these poor women led the SEIEP's founders to fear that they would "plead their vices as a kind of necessary Recourse for a Livelihood," and worsen the already-present problem of prostitution in Boston.⁸⁵ Much like Eve, the moral corruption of idle women promised to bring only hardship and ruin to Boston. "We know what an Influence that Sex has had on us from the Days of the first Woman," preached Thomas Barnard to SEIEP supporters. "When they have contracted evil Habits, they will be bad Wives, bad Mothers, and nurse up an useless Race in their own Likeness."⁸⁶

The SEIEP promised to "rescue tender Modesty from Snares, [and] promote Virtue, the Happiness of particular Relations, as well as the general good."⁸⁷ In contrast to the image of Eve, Charles Chauncy recalled Solomon's proverb of the dutiful, virtuous wife spinning flax with her distaff to rouse support for the SEIEP.⁸⁸ Newspapers which in previous days "rallied the fair Sex for their fondness for fashionable Varities" declared the SEIEP spinners "Partners of Vertue [sic] and Goodness."⁸⁹ Nearly 390 spinners, "some of them Children of 7 or 8 Years old, and several of them Daughters of the best

⁸⁵Boston News-Letter (Boston) 26 February 1753.

⁸⁶Thomas Barnard, A Sermon Preached in Boston, New England, before the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor (Boston, 1758), 23

⁸⁷ Barnard, 23.

⁸⁸Chauncy, 13.

⁸⁹Boston Evening Post 30 April 1753.

Families among us, with their Wheels at Work, sitting orderly in three Rows, made a handsome appearance” on Boston Common in August of 1753. Weavers played music on a stage as thousands of spectators “walk’d in Procession to view the said Spinners.”⁹⁰

But despite its members’ and supporters’ optimism, the inadequacies of Boston’s workhouse were fresh in Bostonians’ minds, and the SEIEP managed to raise only £200 sterling for construction of the manufactory in 1748 and listed only 36 subscribers.⁹¹ In 1749, these members paid £2,150 old tenor to rent a temporary “Linen Manufactory House in the Common, below the seat of Thomas Hancock, Esq., where all Persons may have their Yarn wove in the best and cheapest manner, and with the utmost dispatch.” But with a limited market for coarse, low-quality linen and unskilled spinners, the manufactory was unable to raise enough money to pay its workers. By March 1752, it was £500 in debt.

After reorganizing in 1753 as the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor (SEIEP), its members raised £1,681 over the next several years from private donations.⁹² But from its beginning, the SEIEP faced numerous obstacles. That same year, a small-pox epidemic stopped work at the manufactory because the “spinners were all of them taken off, either by having the illness themselves, or attending upon those that had it.”⁹³ Equipment needed repair; overseers, spinning instructors, weavers and clerks

⁹⁰Boston Gazette 14 August 1753.

⁹¹Nash, “The Failure of Female Factory Labor in Colonial Boston,” 172-173.

⁹²Wiberly, 100.

⁹³Boston Evening Post, 19 February 1753.

wanted to be paid; and supplies of food, fuel, and other necessities needed to be purchased.

In March, 1753 the SEIEP received much-needed financial help in the amount of £1,291 in "Old Tenor Bills of the Neighbouring Governments."⁹⁴ The General Court also responded to the pleas of the SEIEP's supporters by appointing a Governor's Council committee of prominent merchants to tour the SEIEP's operations. The committee recommended that land be bought in Boston and "a house convenient for linen manufacture" be built.⁹⁵ In June 1753, the General Court authorized the linen manufacturers to raise £1,500 by a tax "on every coach, chariot, chaise, calash and chair within this Province," to fund construction of the building.⁹⁶ The treasurer or selectmen of the town were authorized to collect the tax and give it to the ten managers of the manufactory to purchase land and construct a building for the project. Collection of the tax must have been difficult, however, because by January 1756, only £417 had been collected.⁹⁷

Clearly, enthusiasm for the manufactory did not ensure its success. Although operating expenses from 1754 to 1759 were only £1,150, the company's financial records contain only one entry of profits — £165.⁹⁸ Because tax money bought the land on which

⁹⁴BRC, 14: 234-5.

⁹⁵Eric G. Nellis, "Misreading the Signs: Industrial Imitation and Poverty in Colonial Boston," New England Quarterly 59 (1986): 501.

⁹⁶Acts and Resolves, III: 680-2.

⁹⁷Regarding collection see Boston Evening Post, 25 November 1753, 13 October 1755; Wiberly 100.

⁹⁸Wiberly, 102.

the manufactory house was constructed, the province, not the SEIEP, gained title to the building. But the province never paid the manufactory's builder, Thomas Gunter. Although the building cost £1,511 to construct, Gunter was paid only £315.⁹⁹ In 1756, the General Court offered the SEIEP's officers possession of the manufactory house in exchange for the £739 of vehicle tax that officials collected. When the SEIEP's managers rejected this offer, the General Court agreed to pay them £761 (the balance of the £1,500 tax on carriages not collected) and £310 interest.¹⁰⁰

After 1759, the linen manufactory seems to have disappeared in a cloud of debt, and in June 1766, the province tried once again unsuccessfully to sell the manufactory house.¹⁰¹ Why the manufactory failed is a much-debated question. Did the workers reject the restrictions and regulations such institutions placed upon their pre-industrial life styles, as Gary Nash suggested? Or did it fail simply because its founders misunderstood the nature of the colonial market, as Eric Nellis argued? Perhaps its founders never intended the manufactory to succeed because its linens might compete with the profits accrued by trading better-quality linens. Or perhaps the problem of poverty was simply too large for a town unprepared for rapid immigration, migrations, and urbanization.

The answers seem as elusive as the records of its demise. But the question of why the manufactory failed to live up to the expectations placed upon it is perhaps less

⁹⁹Ibid., 101.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Boston Evening Post 9 June 1766.

The answers seem as elusive as the records of its demise. But the question of why the manufactory failed to live up to the expectations placed upon it is perhaps less important than what it reveals about class, poverty, poor relief, and community in colonial urban America. Class existed in colonial America, but the poor whom the SEIEP sought to employ were not male proletarians in the classic Marxist sense. They were not the sick and old who occupied the almshouse. They were poor women and children, often living alone, whose idleness threatened the foundation of colonial society. Their idleness would not only lead to vice and their own corruption, but these idle women would raise children who would also become economic and social burdens on the community. Therefore, the SEIEP had three objectives. One stated objective was to improve the economic situation of Boston by reducing the cost of public poor relief. Secondly, the linen the workers spun would improve New England's trade deficit by decreasing the amount of linens imported from Europe. But the final, unstated objective, was the employment of poor, "idle" women in an occupation which embodied the colonial image of femininity—domesticity and frugality.

CHAPTER THREE

POOR WOMEN IN COLONIAL BOSTON

This chapter examines the position of women in colonial to explain more clearly why the SEIEP seemed to perfect solution for the employment of the town's growing number of poor women and children. According to its supporters, it taught idle women the virtues of industry. But the low pay of the manufactory, intended to supplement poor women's ad-hoc methods of survival, did not threaten the dependent and subordinate position of women which defined the social structure of colonial America. Yet little is known of how women themselves experienced and interpreted their lives in colonial America. Unable to read or write, poor women left no personal accounts of their lives or experiences. Evidence of their existence comes only from overseers' accounts, town poor-relief records, and court records. With so few primary sources written by women themselves, it is not surprising that the question of why so many women were unable to survive in colonial Boston without public assistance is a relatively unexplored topic in American historiography. Inspired by the political agenda of the women's movement, early historians of women in colonial America were attempting to end the historical obscurity of women. In so doing, scholars like Alice Morse Earle and Carl Holliday

described only the achievements and accomplishments of the colonies' most influential women.¹

Others historians did begin to interpret the changing status of women and their work in Colonial America. In 1919, Elisabeth Dexter developed a theory that women in colonial America enjoyed a status much higher than their European counterparts because of their scarcity. Because all workers were scarce and therefore valuable, rigid sex-role distinctions did not exist and women could work outside the home without legal or social censure.² This theory was reinforced by historians like Richard Morris, who argued that in primitive frontier conditions, English common law, which restricted women's independence, was not enforced in the colonies.³ Although writers like Gerda Lerner and Joan Hoff-Wilson call the "golden age" theory a straw argument, all begin from the premise that industrialization constricted the lives of middle-class women.⁴ It has become historical fact that as work became separate from living quarters, middle-class women became the keepers of the home and icons of domesticity. The American

¹ Alice Morse Earl, Home Life in Colonial Days (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1919.); Carl Holliday, Women's Life in Colonial Day (Boston: Cornhill Publishing Co., 1922).

² Elisabeth Dexter, Colonial Women of Affairs: A Study of Women in Business and the Professions in America Before 1776 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919); see also Herbert Moller, "Sex Composition and Correlated Culture Patterns of Colonial America," William and Mary Quarterly 2 (1945): 113-153.

³ Richard B. Morris, Studies in the History of American Law (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Mitchell Co., 1959), 126-200.

⁴ Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," American Studies 10 (1969): 5-15; Joan Hoff-Wilson, "The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution," in Alfred Young, ed., The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976): 384-445.

Revolution only facilitated this process by enshrining motherhood in Republican ideology and imagery.⁵

The relationship between women, industrialization, and the family and how it determined women's position in American society are much-debated historical questions. According to Mary Beth Norton, industrialization only perpetuated the already-present social isolation of women within the domestic sphere. By examining the claims for lost property submitted by 468 white loyalist refugee women, Norton found that many colonial women knew little of their husbands' public lives and professions, and even less about their families' finances. The cultural isolation of women, therefore, made political and legal equality before, during, and after the American Revolution impossible.⁶ While Nancy Cott contended that women found power in their united identity as mothers and homemakers, Carl Degler argued that women struggled to find independent identities within the constraints of family and the ideal of domesticity.⁷

By examining the expansion of capitalism in seventeenth-century England, Alice Clark argued that when industrialization shattered the family as a unit of production, it destroyed the interdependent relationship between husbands and wives that maintained

⁵Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment — An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28 (1976): 187-205; Ruth H. Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1795-1815," *Feminist Studies* 4 (1978): 101-26.

⁶Mary Beth Norton, "Eighteenth-Century American Women in Peace and War: The Case of the Loyalists," *William and Mary Quarterly* 33 (1976): 386-409; Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 593-619.

⁷Nancy Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

equality in the household.⁸ In 1989, Jeanne Boydston built on Clark's work by examining industrial change and the devaluation of women's work in America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like Clark, Boydston concluded that the expansion of a wage-labor system, land shortages, and the removal of the wage-earner from the home undermined the value of women's unseen, un-waged productive and reproductive labor in the eighteenth century.⁹ "These shifts in the culture of colonial society," she explained, "heightened the association of men with the symbols of economic activity and profoundly weakened the ability of women to lay claim to the status of worker."¹⁰

But Boydston also recognized the gender systems embedded in the process of capitalism and industrialization that undermined the value of women's work. A relatively new historical field, gender analysis defines gender as the understanding and knowledge of sexual difference manifested in the culture of a society. Concepts of masculinity and femininity that define sexual difference, and the value ascribed to them, are social and historical constructions specific to time and place. By controlling knowledge, these concepts signify and distribute power within a society by defining the division of labor in both the home and in industry. But the expansion of capitalism and industrialization alone cannot explain the inability of poor women to survive in colonial America. As

⁸Edith Abbot, Women in Industry: a Study in American Economic History (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1910); Alice Clark, Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1919).

⁹Jeanne Boydston, Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹⁰Ibid., 20-22.

Lyle Koehler argued, Puritan sex-role stereotypes became the oppressive means by which women were tied to the authority of their husbands.¹¹ Definitions of masculinity and femininity established in the preindustrial household, therefore, were also part of the process which undermined the value and position of women and their work in colonial Boston.

In colonial America, being a woman meant more than having the capacity to bear children. It meant, for most women, a lifetime of economic, spiritual, and social dependency upon one's father and one's husband. The SEIEP would teach them the merits of work and prevent their moral corruption because the image of the female spinner in colonial America embodied the ideal characteristics of femininity — frugality, industry, and domesticity. When Benjamin Franklin bought his sister Jane a spinning wheel for her wedding present, he wrote that “the character of a good housewife is far preferable to that of being only a pretty gentlewoman.”¹² A woman might acquire the attributes of a gentlewoman, like serving tea and learning embroidery, but she acquired these skills while performing her daily labors in the household.

But this image of the virtuous spinster and housewife was a double-edged sword for women with few economic resources. The intention of the SEIEP's founders may not have been to subordinate women socially, politically, and economically, but the SEIEP and the low monetary value it gave to the work of women spinners served to maintain

¹¹Lyle Koehler, A Search for Power: 'The Weaker Sex' in Seventeenth-Century New England (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

¹²Norton, 118.

female dependency. The social, economic, and political foundation for female subserviency was the colonists belief that “the head of every man is Christ; the head of the woman is man; and the head of Christ is God.”¹³ It is this identification of women and girls as dependents which historically forms the basis of patriarchal authority and it is this identification upon which the SEIEP was built.¹⁴

According to Puritan logic, man was created to serve God in civil and religious matters. Woman, however, served God by serving man, and to disobey her husband was to disobey the fifth commandment to honor one’s father.¹⁵ A husband and wife should cohabitate in harmony, but it was the “Husband’s Government” which “ought to be gentle and easy, and the wife’s obedience” which “should be ready and cheerful.”¹⁶ Puritan love and happiness in marriage, wrote Emily James Putnam in the mid-seventeenth century, “depend[ed] on the favour of men, and the qualities that win this favour are not in general those that are most useful for other purposes.”¹⁷ A woman derived her social status through marriage and family and when she died, colonial newspapers described her only by her father and her husband.¹⁸

¹³Margaret O. Thickstun, Fictions of the Feminine: Puritan Doctrine and the Representation of Women (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 6.

¹⁴Judy Lown, “Not so much a Factory, More a Form of Patriarchy: Gender and Class during Industrialisation,” Gender, Class, and Work, Eva Graminkow, ed., (London: Heineman, 1983): 29-31.

¹⁵Edmund Morgan, The Puritan Family: Religion & Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 12-21.

¹⁶Benjamin Wadsworth, The Well-Ordered Family (Boston, 1712), 35.

¹⁷Quoted in Koehler, 28.

¹⁸Susan Dion, “Women in the Boston Gazette,” Historical Journal of Massachusetts 14 (1986): 87-89.

In church, men and women entered through separate doors and occupied separate pews, with the colonies' most prominent men sitting in the first, higher status, rows.¹⁹ A female voice which questioned male religious authority most certainly risked excommunication and public scrutiny, as the lives of Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer will attest.²⁰ As Puritan William Secker wrote, a virtuous, pious, and God-fearing wife accepted that "[t]hey are not made of the head to claim Superiority They desert the Author of nature that invert the order of nature. The Woman was made for the mans comfort, but the man was not made for the woman's command."²¹ But "even if he were an unbeliever," wrote Governor John Winthrop, "a true wife accounts her subjection her honor and freedom, and would not think her condition safe and free, but in her subjection to her husband's authority."²² Although there is no way of determining whether or not the women the SEIEP employed were Puritans, the influence of Congregational ministers such as Charles Chauncy and Samuel Cooper on the supporters and founders of the SEIEP is unmistakable.

Dress also enforced rigid sex-roles, and wearing the clothes of the opposite sex was strictly forbidden. A Puritan woman was to dress modestly and avoid all attempts to be fashionable. On her fifteenth birthday, Hetty Shepard was scolded for wearing a "fresh

¹⁹Koehler, 41.

²⁰Marilyn J. Westerkamp, "Puritan Patriarchy and the Problem of Revelation," Journal of Interdisciplinary History 3 (1993): 571-595.

²¹William Secker, A Wedding ring for the finger, the salve of divinity on the sore of Humanity (Boston, 1690), n.p.

²²Quoted in Koehler, 32.

kirtle [dress] and wimple [head-covering], though it was not the Lord's day." As Hetty recalled, "It happens from this that my kirtle and wimple are no longer pleasing to me."²³ In 1691, Deborah Byer was forced to stand on a stool in a public place and wear a paper sign which read "For putting on Man's apparel." In 1695, Massachusetts authorities enacted a law against wearing opposite-sex clothing, and offenders could be fined up to £5 or face corporal punishment. In 1697, Mary Cox was summoned before the General Court for wearing men's clothing on the streets of Boston.²⁴

What this social and religious hierarchy meant to women in their everyday lives can be found in the structure of the colonial household. As Joan Scott and Louise Tilly illustrated in their study of eighteenth-century French and English women, in Western culture the household "was the center around which resources, labor, and consumption were balanced," and each individual performed tasks specific to their age and sex.²⁵ Although the colonial household was not as large as first believed, the colonial household usually consisted of more than just the immediate family.²⁶ Servants, apprentices, and lodgers such as spinsters, bachelors, and widows were also included.²⁷ By the mid-

²³Ibid., 59.

²⁴Ibid., 43.

²⁵Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, Women, Work, and Family (New York and London: Routledge, 1987), 12.

²⁶Arthur W. Calhoun, A Social History of the American Family: From Colonial Times to the Present (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1919), 87.

²⁷Several demographic studies have reconstructed the size and composition of colonial households: John Demos, "Notes on Life in Plymouth Colony," William and Mary Quarterly 22 (1965): 264-286; Philip J. Greven, Four Generations: Population, Land and Family in Andover, Massachusetts (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970); Kenneth Lockridge, A New England Town: The First Hundred Years, Dedham, Massachusetts 1636-1736 (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970).

eighteenth century, the average number of household members in Suffolk County, which includes Boston, was 6.3.²⁸

Within the household, economic and political authority was vested in the father, and the primary responsibilities of wives of all social positions were child rearing and acquiring and preparing the household's food and clothing — tasks they performed through informal barter networks composed of their neighbors and local traders. A woman achieved respect largely by the extent to which "She looks well to the Ways of her Household."²⁹ In urban areas, agricultural production was less important, but still they cooked, cleaned, washed, sewed, and cared for their children within the limited sphere of the home and the yard surrounding it. In urban households, families bought rather than made what was needed. As the life of Salem wife Hannah Grafton exemplifies, much of the wife's time in the urban household was occupied with trading and bartering for the family's food supply. She bought her bread from the bakery, her meat from a nearby slaughterhouse, and soap from the soap-boiler located up the street near the Quaker meeting house.³⁰ Women like Grafton, however, carried out their work unrecorded, and unseen by the public eye.

²⁸David H. Flaherty, Privacy in New England (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1972.), 48.

²⁹Cotton Mather, A Family Well-Ordered: or an Essay to Render Parents and Children Happy in One Another (Boston, 1699), 37.

³⁰Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Good Wives: Images and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750 (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1984), 25-27.

More than any other group, the households of Boston's artisans and mariners were income-pooling units consisting of family, dependent relatives, and often boarders.³¹ Like all women, the wives of poor laborers and artisans were also responsible for food production and child care, but the composition of their household tasks was strikingly different. Although women like Grafton and her children supplemented household incomes with spinning and needlework, without adequate resources to purchase a loom, many poor urban women in Boston were unable to supplement their incomes by spinning.³² Only about half the households in mid-eighteenth century Massachusetts owned spinning wheels, and fewer than 10% had looms along with sheep or flax.³³ Instead, the poor urban wife most likely supplemented the household income by taking in wash or offering her services as a wet nurse.³⁴ With few household goods and clothing, cleaning, washing, and even cooking were marginal aspects of her existence.³⁵ According to historian John Bohstedt, the economic interdependency of proto-industrial working-class households gave women nearly equal status in English society.³⁶ But in colonial America, the structure of the preindustrial household did not change the work

³¹For examples of working-class family economies see Olwen Hufton, "Women and the Family Economy in Eighteenth-Century France," French Historical Studies 9 (1975): 1-22 and David Levine, Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom (London: Methuen, 1981).

³²Ulrich, 29; Norton, 20.

³³Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," 604.

³⁴Koehler, 114.

³⁵Carole Shammas, "The Domestic Environment in Early Modern England and America," Journal of Social History 14 (1980-81): 3-24.

³⁶John Bohstedt, "Gender, Household, and Community Politics: Women in English Riots 1790-1810," Past and Present 120 (1988): 96.

poor women were expected to perform and the images of femininity which served to limit their opportunities for survival.

Poor women did, however, regard child care differently from their middle and upper class counterparts. In Puritan households the child care duties of the mother extended to her children's early moral development, and it is through this role that a woman's identity was largely derived.³⁷ It was as children that Puritans learned submission to patriarchal, religious authority which controlled the innately sinful natures of human beings.³⁸ "Undutiful children," wrote Cotton Mather, became morally corrupt adults who might well "commit Unnatural murders."³⁹ In poor homes, the provision of food, not the inculcation of morality, was a mother's primary responsibility and that often meant sending her children out to work or to beg as early as possible.⁴⁰ If a family failed to educate its children in religion or a trade, the town overseers were authorized to take them away.

In 1692, the town selectmen and overseers of the poor were given the authority to bind out pauper, illegitimate, and orphaned white children as apprentices when it was found a child was not being educated, sent to church, or taught a trade.⁴¹ The Act of 1704

³⁷Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience," 606.

³⁸Koehler, 11-14.

³⁹Quoted in *ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁰Hufton, 20-22.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 422-434; Boston Indentures, vol. I (1734-1751), Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library; Albert B. Hart, Commonwealth History of Massachusetts (New York: Russell & Russell, 1927, reprint 1966), 266.

defined those persons who were not rated for town or province taxes as poor, and as such, were liable to having their children bound out by the authorities. A law passed in 1722 made idle or vagrant parents, whether taxed or not, subject to having their children apprenticed to a family recommended by letter to town overseers.⁴² In exchange for employment and a home, apprentices were promised an education, provided they abstained from gambling, fornicating, marrying, or drinking.⁴³ The duration of the contracts varied with the sex of the child and the average age of apprenticeship was nine years old. Boys were apprenticed to about sixty different trades, including husbandry, until the age of twenty-one, while girls were apprenticed only as spinsters and household maids until the age of eighteen.⁴⁴

Destitute families unable to provide food or education for their children were not uncommon in colonial Massachusetts. In 1767, John Adams visited a poor family in the Boston suburb of Braintree and described a house where the husband, wife, and five children occupied "one Chamber, which serves them for Kitchen, Cellar, dining Room, parlour, and Bed-chamber These are the Conveniences and ornaments of a Life of Poverty. These are the Comforts of the Poor. This is Want. This is Poverty!"⁴⁵ More

⁴² Acts and Resolves, II: 242; Lawrence W. Towner, "The Indentures of Boston's Poor Apprentices: 1734-1805," Transactions of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts 43 (1956-1963): 422-424.

⁴³ Boston Indentures, vol. I (1734-1751).

⁴⁴ Towner, 426-427.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Flaherty, 40.

often, the poor families of Boston shared dwellings. By the mid-eighteenth century, over one-third of the families in Suffolk County lived in dual-occupancy homes.⁴⁶

Male and female space did overlap on occasion, and in both middle and artisan homes, a woman could serve as a husband's helpmeet. A woman astute in business matters might assist her husband in his occupation, but it was only in his absence that could she assume his public position of authority in the household. As one seventeenth-century Englishman observed, a woman "in her husband's absence, is wife and deputy-husband, which makes her double to files of her diligence."⁴⁷ When her mariner husband Joshua was away, Hannah Grafton also ran the shop attached to her house that was filled with goods Joshua acquired while traveling.⁴⁸ New England women were to be friendly neighbors, deputy husbands, obedient wives, and devoted mothers. But from the days of earliest settlement they were economically, socially, and politically excluded from public life.⁴⁹ It is these family-centered "forms of social organization," Laurel Thatcher Ulrich argued, that "tied each woman's household to the larger world of her village or town."⁵⁰

A lack of formal education reinforced the subordinate position of women in colonial American households. A woman was educated only in the hope that she would be a

⁴⁶Ibid., 51.

⁴⁷Quoted in Ulrich, Good Wives, 36.

⁴⁸Ibid., 27.

⁴⁹Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "'A Friendly Neighbor': Social Dimension of Daily Work in Northern Colonial New England," in Women and Power in American History: A Reader, Vol. I to 1880, ed. Kathryn Kish Klar and Thomas Dublin (Englewood: Prentice Hall, 1991): 37-49.

⁵⁰Ulrich, Good Wives, 33-34.

better companion and servant to her husband. Her intelligence should not exceed her husband's, and so she was rarely taught to write.⁵¹ Such a conclusion is supported by Kenneth Lockridge's study of literacy which found that fewer than one-third of female testators in New England between 1650 and 1670 were able to sign their names to their wills.⁵² Evidence does exist that literacy did improve, and by the mid-eighteenth century poor women were capable of signing their names.⁵³ Young daughters of wealthy families attended "dame" schools where they were taught the tasks of a goodwife: "Brewing, Baking, Cookery, Dairy, Scouring, Washing, Dinner matters, Afternoon works, Evening works, Supper Matters, After supper matters," and needlework.⁵⁴ A poor girl's only chance of an education was through apprenticeship, but these trained young girls to be only two things: spinsters and housewives.⁵⁵ Women, wrote Benjamin Franklin in a well-circulated pamphlet, were "quite unfitted for the delicate pleasures of a rational Esteem, and the God like Joys of manly Friendship," because, "the substantial Culture of their Minds is grossly neglected; true good sense, and sound Judgment, the inestimable

⁵¹Jennifer E. Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England," American Quarterly 40 (1988): 18-41.

⁵²Kenneth Lockridge, Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West (New York: Norton, 1974), 38.

⁵³Gloria L. Main, "An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England," Journal of Social History 24 (1991): 579-589.

⁵⁴Mather, A Family Well-Ordered, 37.

⁵⁵Boston Indentures, vol. I (1734-1751), Towner, 420-422.

Perfection of a generous, an open, and noble mind, are but little considered in their education.”⁵⁶

But a sound education did not appear necessary for women. No woman, single or married, rich or poor, was permitted to vote in town meetings. Upon marriage a woman’s legal identity was subsumed under her husband’s and she became, legally, a *feme covert*.⁵⁷ But each region varied in its treatment of women and property, and throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries women and their legal right to property were governed not only by commonlaw and equity courts, but by tradition as well.⁵⁸ Private examinations, wives’ signatures on land deeds, widow’s liens on family property, and marriage settlements all gave women a measure of economic independence in colonial America.⁵⁹ But when colonial legal reformers in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania sought to simplify these legal confusions, they remained “true to their belief in male dominance within the family . . . [and] increased a husband’s ability to control his wife’s estate. In other words, when simplification of the law required either more or less independence for women, seventeenth-and eighteenth-century reformers invariably chose the latter.”⁶⁰ Historian Carol Karlson even went so far as to argue that “anxieties about

⁵⁶Benjamin Franklin, Reflections on Courtship and Marriage: In Two Letters to a Friend (Philadelphia, 1746), 2.

⁵⁷Norton, 5; Morris, 126-200.

⁵⁸Ibid., 152.

⁵⁹Marilynn Salmon, Women and the Law of Property in Early America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 188-189.

⁶⁰Ibid.

inheritance lay at the heart of most witchcraft accusations.”⁶¹ Marriage did provide women one legal advantage. A married woman could not be convicted of a crime her husband forced her to commit because she could not legally refuse his commands.⁶²

Upon their husbands’ deaths, many women were left destitute. Colonial intestacy laws, which distributed the property of inhabitants who died without wills, favored the eldest son over his mother and his siblings. After her husband’s death, the wife retained only the right to her personal belongings and one-third of her husband’s estate until her death, called her dower right.⁶³ A widow’s rights were protected by law, but if an estate was mired in debt, widowed women became economic dependents upon their children, usually the eldest son.⁶⁴ Although some widows lived comfortably, the widows of poor mariners and artisans in seaport towns like Boston were left with few resources on which to survive.

Although the occupations available to women were low-status extensions of a woman’s domestic work, clearly the legal, social, and economic restrictions colonial society placed upon women were not absolute. In reality, all women did not adhere to the belief that the husband was the economic, political, and religious head of the household,

⁶¹Carol F. Karlson, The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 84.

⁶²N.E.H. Hull, Female Felons: Women and Serious Crime in Colonial Massachusetts (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 23-24.

⁶³Morris, 155-164; Ulrich, 7-9.

⁶⁴Alexander Keyssar, “Widowhood in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts: A Problem in the History of the Family,” Perspectives in American History 7 (1974): 92-110.

and power within the colonial household was often contested. Between 1630 and 1699 in New England, at least 128 men and 57 women were tried for abusing their spouses and five men actually murdered their wives.⁶⁵ Elizabeth and Christopher Lawson's tumultuous marriage is an excellent example of the consequences of contention within colonial households. According to Christopher, Elizabeth "violently laid hands on mee and scratcht mee by the face . . . shee likewise Challenging mee to trye who was master: upon which I threw her downe on the deck."⁶⁶ After allowing Elizabeth to live on her own for two years, the couple rejoined and she promptly took all his household goods, clothing, and tools to Boston. Eight year later, the Massachusetts magistrates rejoined the couple, whereupon Elizabeth promptly asserted that Christopher was a rogue, whoremaster, and syphilitic.⁶⁷ Announcement of runaway and errant wives were common in colonial newspapers. Susannah Chamber's husband declared that she "by all accounts keeps other men to frequent my house and cohabitates with them, and has used me very ill."⁶⁸

For many women and men of all social rankings the answer to their unhappy union was divorce, which was considerably easier to obtain in the colonies than in England.⁶⁹

⁶⁵Koehler, 137.

⁶⁶Quoted in *ibid.*, 157.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 157-158.

⁶⁸Boston Gazette 24 April 1769

⁶⁹Kelly, D. Weisburg, "Under Greet Temptations Heer: Women and Divorce in Puritan Massachusetts," Feminist Studies 2 (1975): 183-194.

Between 1692 and 1786, 122 wives and 101 husbands filed for divorce in Massachusetts, and more than a quarter of them lived in Boston.⁷⁰ But by examining these divorce records, Nancy Cott found, not surprisingly, that women were held to higher standards of morality in marriage than were men. While 70% of the male petitions for divorce were granted on the sole grounds of adultery, not a single wife was granted a petition for divorce on the grounds of adultery alone until 1774. A woman was granted a divorce only on the grounds of both adultery and desertion or bigamy. “Despite the seventh commandment,” Cott wrote, “English tradition enshrined the double standard, forgiving a husband’s sexual transgressions but calling a wife’s abhorrent.”⁷¹

Although single women retained their legal status, social, legal, and economic pressures compelled young women of every social status to marry. Daughters rarely inherited substantial amounts of property, and New England towns avoided “all presendents & evill events of graunting lotts unto single maidens not disposed of.”⁷² Salem town proprietors denied Deborah Holmes an allotment of land and instead gave her a bushel of Indian corn with the assurance that it “would be a bad president [sic] to keep house alone.”⁷³ A woman who did not marry was not highly regarded. If she was not married by 30, she was called a “thornback.” Bookseller John Dunton remarked in

⁷⁰Nancy F. Cott, “Divorce and the Changing Status of Women in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts,” in Sklar and Dublin, 91.

⁷¹Ibid., 97.

⁷²Quoted in Morris, 131.

⁷³Ibid.

1686 that “an old (or Superannuated) Maid, in Boston, is thought such a curse as nothing can exceed it.”⁷⁴

Unable to read or write, the occupational opportunities for young women outside marriage were limited. Because young women did not marry until their early to mid twenties in colonial Massachusetts, they were expected to work to support the family in whatever ways possible until they married.⁷⁵ Some young women became servants in neighboring households, but this work was often sporadic, and competition with black slaves and white indentured servants was keen.⁷⁶ Most single daughters in rural Massachusetts spent hours spinning to supplement household incomes. As early as 1656 the Massachusetts General Court ordered that “all hands not necessarily imployd on other occassions, as woemen, girles, and boyes” must spin three pounds of cloth per week for thirty weeks of each year or pay a fine of 12 pence for each pound short.⁷⁷ Although rural single women were likely to be able to spin, the necessity of establishing the SEIEP’s spinning school reveals that many of Boston’s young girls possessed no spinning skills. It seems most likely that poor urban girls assisted their mothers with child care and food production. If the father worked as an artisan in the home, an

⁷⁴Quoted in Koehler, 44.

⁷⁵Daniel S. Smith, “The Demographic History of colonial New England,” Journal of Economic History 32 (1972): 165-184.

⁷⁶Norton, 23; Koehler, 112-113; Lawrence Towner, “A Fondness for Freedom: Servant Protest in Puritan Society.” William and Mary Quarterly 19 (1962): 201-219.

⁷⁷Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England (Boston: W.White, 1853), vol. V: 4; Koehler, 47.

unlikely situation for the daughters of traders, sailors, and soldiers, she also assisted him. Working for organizations like the SEIEP may have helped these poor young women with few alternatives save money for dowries or even acquire the skills necessary to become a weaver's wife, a lucrative position for a young woman of modest means.

But many women, single and married, failed to live exemplary lives of Puritan virtue and morality, and it is these women that most threatened the foundation of colonial society. No place offered more opportunities for debauchery than the streets of Boston. By mid-eighteenth century, prostitution made its appearance in Boston, and throughout the province, the rise in the recorded number of pre-marital pregnancies attests to the fact that many young women did not live up to colonial standards of female morality.⁷⁸ Nor was motherhood always revered. Infanticide was frequent enough in colonial America for the Massachusetts General Court to pass a law in 1692 specifying that women whose child died mysteriously must provide the corroborative testimony of at least one other witness at the time of birth to prove that she did not kill the infant. Between 1630 and 1699, ten mothers were hanged for killing their children.⁷⁹

But the 1730s and 1740s marked a turning point in the treatment of female criminals. Fewer infanticide and fornication charges were prosecuted and fewer defendants convicted.⁸⁰ As the commercial economy expanded and the influence of family and male

⁷⁸Robert V. Wells, "Illegitimacy and bridal pregnancy in colonial America," in Bastardy and its Comparative History, Peter Laslett, ed., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980): 353.

⁷⁹Koehler, 200.

⁸⁰Hull, 64.

authority declined, the number of women prosecuted for property crimes steadily increased as the eighteenth century progressed. By the 1760s, the number of females convicted of property crimes exceeded all other crimes for the first time.⁸¹

Employment of women in an institution like the SEIEP promised to keep such women under patriarchal control and authority which, to many, seemed threatened by the mid-eighteenth century. It promised to inculcate the values of morality and industry in the lives of women and their children where their husbands and fathers had failed. Poverty, colonists believed, stemmed from idleness and vice, not gender or economic fluctuations. The women the SEIEP employed not only sent the cost of poor relief soaring, their poverty threatened the images of femininity that were the foundation of colonial society.

In eighteenth-century Massachusetts, a woman's destiny was to be a wife and mother, and as such she possessed few legal rights. Her labor and her spirituality were defined by its value to her husband. Yet she was to be dutiful, virtuous, and industrious for her husband first, her God second, her children third, and herself last. The SEIEP was founded with the intention of balancing New England's trade deficit and reducing the cost of public poor relief, of which women and their children were the primary recipients. The SEIEP offered these impoverished women employment, but it was employment which built upon and reinforced women's economic and social dependency upon men. What ultimately determined employment with the SEIEP, there fore, was not poverty

⁸¹Ibid.

alone, but gender and the ideals, expectations, and value of women and their work in colonial America.

CONCLUSION

This study of the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor demonstrates that economic, social, and gender studies of colonial America can be integrated. While writers like Jeanne Boydston have shown the relationship between a changing economic structure and women's status, their studies have largely been ignored by economic historians who continue to see women's history as an auxiliary historical field unimportant to their own work. The SEIEP reveals that there is a relationship between power and concepts of femininity and masculinity which govern social, economic, and political change, as Lyle Koehler illustrated in his study of women in seventeenth-century Puritan New England.

As urbanization, immigration, disease, and war transformed the landscape of colonial Boston, thousands found themselves impoverished and destitute, and the cost of public poor relief nearly doubled by mid-eighteenth century. Boston's economic, political, and religious leaders created the SEIEP to alleviate rising tax rates which financed the increasing cost of poor relief. But the SEIEP also addressed the particular problem of women and poverty in colonial Boston.

As this thesis proves, women, more often than men, suffered from the adverse consequences of Boston's economic decline. But transient, impoverished women living adrift outside the traditional institutions of home and family were more than economic

burdens to Boston's inadequate system of poor relief. They threatened a patriarchal structure and social order which allocated power and authority to men. Because colonists believed poverty stemmed from idleness, the source of moral decline and degradation, these women undermined traditional images of femininity and domesticity. Colonists believed that by living outside the religious, political, and economic authority of men, these women would lead morally corrupt lives and raise children who would become economic, social, and moral burdens upon the community. By institutionalizing these colonial images of femininity, the SEIEP founders hoped to bring these women under the traditional authority of men. But like the similar work-relief projects upon which it was modeled, it was destined to failure. As the first chapter of this thesis explains, poverty does not always stem from idleness, vice, and moral decline, but more often from rapid economic change, disease, war, and abandonment — realities the founders and supporters of the SEIEP did not address adequately.

The conclusions of historian Gary Nash are therefore wrong. Boston's leaders were not abandoning their traditional obligation to provide poor relief by establishing the SEIEP. They were sincerely concerned with alleviating the problem of poverty in their community. But the changes transforming Boston were simply more than their social structure could bear. The SEIEP was not a step toward modernity, but a look backward. Not to an idyllic time when communities cared unselfishly for their poor, because such a time did not exist in colonial Boston, but to sixteenth and seventeenth century traditions which blamed poverty on individual moral corruption and failure. Although their

solution may seem misguided by present standards, the founders of the SEIEP should not be held to derision. They were simply agents in the creation of an institution which relied upon the values and traditions of their time. But that institution became a model for a factory system in the nineteenth century which continued to recreate and reinforce images of femininity and subordination as the structure of American society rapidly transformed.

Today, women and their children continue to be the primary recipients of governmental assistance, and it is not presentist history to realize that as politicians in Washington D.C. debate welfare reforms like work relief, they are relying upon images and precedents established in colonial America. It is a historical problem that began in the seventeenth-century, and historians must continue to analyze the origins of the relationship between women and poor relief as our society proceeds into the twenty-first century. Despite the increasing number of women now visible in the public sphere, power continues to be built upon images of masculinity and femininity established in colonial America, and it is these images our society must understand if real and substantial social change is to be effected.

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