Poor Relief in Philadelphia,
1790–1840

Although French philosophes and English rationalists had in the eighteenth century placed a new stress upon the importance of human personality—expressed in America mainly through the works of Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson—this doctrine had, after the close of the Revolutionary War, lost much of its vitality. With the rise of evangelicalism a new driving power was injected into humanitarian efforts. Many of the evangelicals adopted beliefs akin to perfectionism, feeling that the power of God could and would work to bring about righteousness not only in men but also in social institutions. Believing that they were the Lord’s ambassadors to set up the Kingdom of God in this world, the evangelicals brought a hitherto-unknown passion and courage to the crusade for equality and freedom.

The most widespread of the evangelical reform movements was that against intemperance. The most colorful, because of the intense opposition it aroused and because of its consequences, was that waged against slavery. Other humanitarian projects were numerous—the most notable those looking toward prison reform, world peace, and universal education. Not so well known were the projects planned to correct other social ills—to prevent the ill-treatment of the American Indian, to outlaw duelling and lotteries, to provide better care for orphans, deaf mutes, the blind, “Magdalens,” and the poor. These minor reform movements, all influenced to greater or less degree by the evangelicals, helped to determine the pattern of society of the early nineteenth century.

Much of the poor relief in Philadelphia in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was provided by churches or benevolent institutions. In 1713 the Friends opened the first almshouse in the town. Nineteen years later the city established its poorhouse, in which were assembled the poor, the sick, and the insane, and in 1767 there
was erected on the block bounded by Spruce and Pine, Tenth and Eleventh streets, the Almshouse for the Relief and Employment of the Poor, popularly known as the Bettering House. Yet even this municipal institution seemed in its early years to succeed only under Quaker management. The traveler Brissot stated in 1788 that before the Revolution the Bettering House had been well managed by the Friends, but when legislation was passed barring the Quakers from management, the House suffered from depredation and loss of credit and was not again put on a sound basis until the administration was given back to the Friends. "Good God!" Brissot exclaimed, "there is then a country where the soul of a governor of a hospital is not a soul of brass!" After 1803 the system of municipal poor relief in Philadelphia was changed. As a result indoor relief was virtually done away with and the binding out as apprentices of poor children, disorderly persons, and, to a limited extent, of married men and women was substituted. The city was divided into districts with a Guardian of the Poor responsible for the administration of relief in each area.

Typical of the relief dispensed by individual churches was the fund administered by the First Baptist Church for the relief of orphans and of apprentices who had lost their masters. Collections were begun in 1794 and within a year the fund had over four hundred subscribers. The objects of the society included education of the children as well as financial aid. This work was so successful that in 1812 the society was enlarged to include all the Baptist churches of the city. Of more general value was the bequest of four houses by Elias Boudinot to the Second Presbyterian Church for the use of poor widows and children.

About the turn of the century Philadelphians became interested in organizations that would go one step beyond the dole and try to aid the poor by providing work for them. The city had of course set up the Bettering House to care for the destitute, but a desire now arose to help the poor remain in their own homes by affording them an opportunity to earn an income. The oldest organization with this

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object was the Quaker-sponsored Female Society of Philadelphia for the Relief and Employment of the Poor. This group, founded by Ann Parrish, after the yellow fever outbreak of 1793, established a House of Industry near Second and Arch Streets. There women were taught spinning, and their children were given the rudiments of an education. By 1819 the society had a warehouse where they offered for sale “Sheeting, Table Linen, Napkins, Comfortables, Bolster and Pillow Cases, Stockings, Homespun, Cotton and Woolen Yarn, Linen and Muslin Shirts, etc.” In the first twenty-three years of its existence these Quaker women visited and helped 11,977 sick and poor and gave 6,262 articles of clothing to the destitute. Their House of Industry had at times furnished work to fifty women at once. A somewhat similar organization was the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances. This group was organized in 1800 and financed by five hundred dollars which had been raised but which had not been needed for the relief of the yellow fever victims of Baltimore. The Female Association believed in giving relief rather than in making gifts of money, and opened a room on Chestnut Street for the reception of food and clothes. One of the favorite projects of this Association was the education of children.

The organization of women in Philadelphia to show the strongest evangelical influence was the Female Hospitable Society for the Relief and Employment of the Poor, instituted in 1808. Membership in the society was open to “females of every Christian denomination.” The women were much interested in the religious welfare of the unfortunates and provided in their Articles of Association that a visiting committee of five should “administer spiritual as well as temporal relief.” They were to pray with the sick, “exhort the healthy to seek the Lord while he may be found,” and “use every prudent means to bring back lost sheep to the fold of Christ.” Visits were made “without respect to nation, color, or profession” to homes, to the hospital, to the Bettering House, and to the prison. Wives of evangelical ministers filled important positions in the

society, notably Mrs. Henry Holcombe of the First Baptist Church, Mrs. Jacob Brodhead of the Dutch Reformed Church, and Mrs. J. J. Janeway of the Second Presbyterian Church. The Philadelphia clergy worked well with the Hospitable Society, so that by 1831 the organization was able to report that thirty-three pastors had preached sermons and taken offerings for the work. In one year, the visitors handed out sixty-nine Bibles, one hundred and nine New Testaments, twelve Prayer Books, and three hundred and fifty tracts.

Twenty-four women were designated as managers, whose duty it was to visit all applicants for aid, ascertain their need, and then send the worthy ones to the storeroom where they could obtain employment or relief. The Hospitable Society provided work by sponsoring flax spinning and garment making. A workshop was at first opened at 2 Appletree Alley, but later all work was done in private homes. The articles made were then placed on sale. The women hoped by this method to discourage idleness and to encourage industry. By 1826 when the society applied for incorporation, it was able to report that it was furnishing work to 250 women a year, besides giving medical aid and sustenance in the same proportion.

The Female Hospitable Society made a serious attempt to solve the problem of pauperism. In 1822 the managers expressed their regret that no efficient means of employment had been worked out, feeling that if work were given the needy instead of money, there would be a decrease of poverty. Four years later these reformers approached even closer to the crux of the matter by declaring that the wealthy needed to inquire into the true causes of poverty instead of calling the poor lazy or vicious. What the unfortunate needed was counsel, encouragement, and jobs. The first two of these items the women attempted to provide through their visiting, and through the distribution of Christian literature. The last item remained the great obstacle.

The pauper class in Philadelphia had greatly increased following the second war with England. Perhaps the general idleness growing out of the conflict had somewhat demoralized the lower classes. At any rate, when hard times arrived in 1816, there was much misery

9 Ibid., 53.
10 Ibid., 31.
among the people, and an earnest attempt was made to seek the
causes of pauperism. Although private charities were busily engaged
in helping to relieve distress, many citizens felt that this method was
insufficient and ineffective. A public meeting to discuss ways to aid
the poor was held on February 17, 1817. At this meeting a Com-
mittee of Superintendence of twelve was named to manage the funds
collected by solicitors and to investigate the reasons for mendicity
and recommend plans for amelioration. Tilghman served on the
committee, as did Ralston, Vaux, Archer, John Goodman, and Peter
Keyser. 11 These twelve men conducted their investigation by sending
out a circular letter asking eighteen questions, such as, who were the
most improvident in the city? what did the poor allege to be the
cause of their distress? to what extent did intemperance contribute?
and how many children could industrious parents support? 12

In April the Committee of Superintendence made public its find-
ings. A new mode of administering charity must be devised, the
report stated. The old system of many overlapping benevolent
societies giving out dole indiscriminately had created dependence and
drawn many beggars into the city. The solution was to be found in
providing a larger number of administrators of the poor laws who
should have an accurate knowledge of every applicant; in creating
greater employment possibilities; in increasing the schooling for the
children; in improving the care of orphans; and in discouraging the
use of liquor, together with a rigid enforcement of the law against
dram shops. The most improvident, the questionnaires revealed,
were the Negroes and the Irish emigrants, the intemperate and the
day laborers. When most of the answers declared that unemploy-
ment was the cause of poverty, the Committee countered by assert-
ing that "this excuse" of unemployment was "generally true" but
that the real causes were most frequently idleness, intemperance, and

11 Goodman, an alderman and legislator, active in temperance work and much interested in
the House of Refuge, was a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Keyser was pastor
for sixty-three years and bishop for forty-seven years of the Church of the Brethren in Phila-
delphia and Germantown. William Tilghman, chief justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court,
was a member of Christ Church. Robert Ralston, well known for his philanthropic and civic
interests, was one of the most active members of the Second Presbyterian Church. Roberts
Vaux was a Friend.

12 Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Economy, Report of the Library
Committee (Philadelphia, 1817).
sickness. In order to make sure that their recommendations might be put into effect, the Committee of Superintendence suggested the formation of a society directed toward the melioration of the condition of the poor.

Within a month such an organization had been formed, entitled the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Economy. Evangelicals held prominent offices, with Ralston as president, Thomas Leiper one of the vice-presidents, and Samuel Hazard as secretary. Charles Chauncey was a counsellor, and serving on important committees were Zachariah Poulson, John Connelly, John Goodman, M. L. Bevan, Thomas Latimer, Benjamin Stillé, and the Reverend P. F. Mayer. The society's purpose was declared to be the promotion, encouragement, and protection of the industry, economy, and morals of the people. Together with full employment and the practice of temperance and economy, the society was to teach the poor "to cherish a regard for moral and religious obligation." Standing committees were selected, one to study the public school system and report on needed improvements; another was to examine the poor laws; a third, to concern itself with promoting temperance and suppressing tippling houses; a fourth, to suggest such household economies as would enable those of small income to avoid poverty; and a fifth was to check on the management of prisons. The Society for the Promotion of Public Economy accomplished much good, its most eminent achievement being doubtless that of the school committee which pushed through the legislature a measure that made the city and county of Philadelphia the first school district of Pennsylvania and established in it public schools.

Hard times continued in the city for about five years and kept the attention of the humanitarians upon the problems of poor relief. The unusually severe winter of 1820-1821, so cold that the Delaware River was frozen over from the beginning of December to the middle of February, made it necessary to send out a general call for dona-

13 The Second Presbyterian Church was well represented in the above list of officers by Ralston, Leiper, Hazard, Chauncey, Bevan, Latimer, and Stillé ("rare specimen of a true Christian gentleman"). Connelly was of the First Presbyterian Church. Poulson is believed to have been a Moravian. Mayer was pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. John.


15 J. B. McMaster, History of the People of the United States (New York, 1885-1927), IV, 527.
tions to relieve the suffering poor. Of all the demands upon this relief fund, the heaviest was that for fuel. More than twenty-five hundred dollars was expended for wood alone. It occurred to someone that if the poor could be encouraged to buy wood in the summer they would save a great deal. Hence there was formed in May, 1821, the "Fuel Saving Fund," whose object was to collect throughout the summer and autumn small weekly amounts from the poor and then to distribute the wood, bought during the summer in large lots, at cost price during the winter. The plan, directed by Ralston, was of immediate benefit, allowing the members to obtain wood the next winter at $4.64 a cord while it was selling for nine dollars on the wharf. Ten years later the society had added coal to its services and was distributing it at four dollars a ton when dealers were charging twelve to fifteen dollars.

The Fuel Saving Fund was but a variation of the idea at the back of the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society, a bank established in 1816 for the savings of "tradesmen, mechanics, laborers, servants and others, and of affording industrious persons the advantages of security and interest." Initiated by Condy Raguet, and for sixteen years under the presidency of Andrew Bayard, the Society paid 4.8% interest and limited individual deposits to five hundred dollars in any one year. Neither president nor managers received any emolument.

More and more the Philadelphia reformers were turning away from the idea of helping the poor through a system of doles to an acceptance of the theory of helping these lower classes to help themselves. Although the humanitarians were unable to create jobs in industry or to effect a raise in wages, they did attempt to maintain the self-respect of the depressed classes by providing home work for the unemployed. One of the most active of this type of organization was the Provident Society for Employing the Poor, founded in February, 1824. Its purpose was to aid "persons in indigent circumstances to support themselves by their own industry." A house of industry was opened on Market Street. One room was devoted to

17 American Daily Advertiser, December 20, 1831.
19 Raguet belonged to the Church of the New Jerusalem, Bayard to the Second Presbyterian.
instructing children in weaving, reading, and writing. Within the first eight weeks employment was given to fourteen hundred persons, mostly in their homes. Once again the indefatigable Bishop William White appears as president, assisted in this work by Vaux, Ralston, Henry, and the Reverend Benjamin Allen.

In 1825 the Provident Society established at its headquarters an asylum for lost children, the only such place in the city until in 1855 the police took over this service. The society opened, in 1829, a house for the delivery of work to poor women, supplying employment to 1,137 women during the next twelve months. This plan proved somewhat too successful, for by the end of the year the store-room was overstocked with the shirts the women had made. Sixty-five hundred dollars was still outstanding, and debts of one thousand dollars were due. It was thus necessary to limit operations for the next year. One of the English visitors to Philadelphia believed he saw the solution to this problem. By giving work to all who applied and by selling products at reduced prices, the Provident Society was drawing labor to an already overstocked market and diverting capital from its proper channels. The answer was simple enough, the visitor remarked. Merely send the workers to the West where they were needed. This expedient had previously been considered, notably by the Committee of Superintendence in 1817. To its query as to whether the indigent would be willing to move West if assistance were given, the almost unanimous reply was that emigration would never occur while the poor were "so bountifully provided for" in the city.

The attempt to discover and abolish the causes of pauperism continued in Philadelphia throughout the eighteen-twenties. So much criticism of charitable institutions as pauperizers of the working classes had arisen that a committee was appointed in 1829 to make a study and to report on this subject. The committee, two of whose members were Mathew Carey and the Reverend M. M. Carll, found

20 Carey and Lea, op. cit., 68.
21 The latter, rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, was well known for his evangelicalism. Alexander Henry was nationally prominent in the work of the Presbyterian Church.
a strong economic factor at work.\textsuperscript{25} Seamstresses, spoolers, spinners, and like workers, the committee discovered, were woefully underpaid. Although some distress was caused by drink, it was not responsible for half of the misery of the poor. The committee wished to correct the error of the talk that charitable organizations produced idleness and dissipation. The seven most prominent benevolent societies in 1828 had received only $1,069 and disbursed $3,740, most of it to the aged and sick. These societies should be commended for managing their funds "with great prudence and circumspection" and for attempting to provide work for the distressed. The committee recommended to the public that wages be raised, that more employment be provided, that a society for bettering the condition of the poor be established, and that more money be given to the existing charitable societies.\textsuperscript{26}

The \textit{Columbian Star} agreed with this economic theory of the cause of much poverty, pointing out that the most skillful woman could make only twelve shirts a week, for which she received twelve and a half cents per garment. This amounted to a wage of $1.50 a week, of which rent alone took fifty cents. Since it seemed impossible to raise wages (an application to the government for an increase having failed), the best thing to do in the opinion of the editor of the \textit{Columbian Star} would be to form the proposed Society for Improving the Condition of the Poor.\textsuperscript{27}

This society was formed about October 1 with Carey as president and several well-known evangelicals among the officers.\textsuperscript{28} Thomas G. Allen, an Episcopalian clergyman, was appointed general agent, his duties being to teach the poor habits of order, cleanliness, and industry; to urge that children be sent to school and that all go to the church of their choice; to give counsel, comfort, and religious instruction; to show the ill effects of intemperance; and to distribute whatever money might be given him. Allen entered his new labor with an evangelistic zeal, making 246 "pastoral visits" within the first two months. "May the Lord," he wrote to the managers, "direct and

\textsuperscript{25} Carll was pastor of the Church of the New Jerusalem and Carey was a Roman Catholic of liberal views.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Register of Pennsylvania}, III (1829), 228, 229.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{I} (1829), 232, 233. This was a Baptist newspaper.

\textsuperscript{28} The Reverend G. T. Bedell and the Reverend E. S. Ely were vice-presidents, Thomas Latimer, secretary, and Alexander Henry a manager.
prosper our work to his great glory, and the present comfort and eternal salvation of immortal souls." Within eighteen months he had paid 2,036 visits to 646 families, handing out money, Bibles, and tracts. As a result of his observations, Allen came to the conclusion that the more prominent causes of poverty were intemperance, improvidence, low wages for females, and the want of moral and religious instruction. He therefore made a plea for the organization of temperance societies, for reducing the number of tippling houses, for prohibiting the opening of gardens and shops on Sunday. He thought that employers should become friends of the poor, and he hoped the public might be awakened to the injustice of women's wages. Finally he recommended that agents be enlisted to preach from house to house. For several months of his agency for the Bettering Society, Allen had also served as agent for the Philadelphia Benevolent Society. This latter connection he felt compelled to give up because of his difference with the managers. "In vain," he reported, "you will look for any extensive or permanent moral result from your efforts, if these efforts are made without an immediate reference to the influence of Gospel Truth."

The Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor reveals a characteristic tendency of the day—the consideration of philanthropy as a moral question. The relief of physical need, it was felt, should always be accompanied by moral benefits. This consideration of poor relief as a moral obligation was somewhat modified and charity placed upon a more scientific basis in 1831 by the formation of the Union Benevolent Association, a society which was to be much imitated throughout America and which was the forerunner of the modern system of urban poor relief. Although the Union Association was to win much prominence, it did so as a result of combining successfully various theories and practices already in operation rather than because of any novel scheme put into operation.

The new society was dedicated to the task of removing distress,

29 Philadelphia Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, Constitution (Philadelphia, 1829), 9.
30 Philadelphian, VII (1831), 73. A Presbyterian newspaper.
31 Ibid., VII (1831), 178.
32 National Conference of Charities and Correction, Proceedings, 1899 (Boston, 1900), 359. The Association was not incorporated until 1837, which is usually the date given for its founding.
preventing pauperism, and providing employment and necessary instruction for the poor.\textsuperscript{33} Primary emphasis was ever to be kept upon yielding a moral influence upon the lives of the poor. This influence was to be exerted by personal visitation of volunteers. The city was divided into districts, to each of which were assigned committees of women, who were to visit and encourage the needy in habits of industry, cleanliness, and economy, and “to point out the means for improving their moral condition.” Men’s committees were to attend to such cases as might be improper for the consideration of women and to help men to find work. One or more agents were to be appointed, and all cases of need were to be reported to the city Guardians of the Poor.\textsuperscript{34} The president of the Union Benevolent Association for the first four years was the Quaker physician, Thomas C. James. He was aided by many evangelicals, including Matthew Newkirk and Matthias Baldwin.\textsuperscript{35}

Within the first year four hundred and fifty women visitors were enrolled, and 2,669 families regularly visited, of whom 1,068 received some aid. Since the winter had been very severe, a public collection of $4,196.98 had been received to help the Association relieve the distressed. This money was expended largely for wood, corn meal, and potatoes. The ladies had also started a school, which met in the chapel of the First Baptist Church and soon had enrolled one hundred and fifty children.\textsuperscript{36} By the end of fifteen months a total of 938 children had been placed in school. The visitors took an active interest in the general welfare of the poor. They were especially distressed over the ravages caused by intemperance and joyfully reported the formation of every new temperance society. In 1836 they reported that they had helped to break up twelve tippling shops and induced eighty-four persons to join temperance societies.

Thus Philadelphia set the pattern for improving the material and social conditions of the poor in cities—a pattern that was to be followed in America until 1877, when the first charity organization society was formed in Buffalo, thereby inaugurating a second general


\textsuperscript{34} \textit{American Daily Advertiser}, December 13, 1831.

\textsuperscript{35} Baldwin, founder of the Baldwin Locomotive Works, was an active and liberal member of the First Presbyterian Church. Newkirk was prominent in both the Second and the Central Presbyterian Churches.

\textsuperscript{36} Union Benevolent Association, \textit{Second Annual Report} (1833), 5.
movement in the social-welfare field. The Philadelphia pattern had evolved out of much experimentation, laboratory work in which evangelical church members, acting not as church representatives but as individuals, had played a significant role. The concern of the evangelical communions for the salvation of man's soul spread into a desire to help men on the physical and material levels; and this wider vision combined with other liberal ideals to fashion a more modern social theory.

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