The Philadelphia Welfare Crisis of the 1820s

Hostilities between England and the United States ended in 1815, and within the next two years both countries faced post-war depressions. The number of unemployed escalated sharply, and when many of them applied for public aid, so too did welfare costs climb precipitately. Inevitably, poor taxes rose and triggered a widespread concern about public welfare on both sides of the Atlantic—a concern which resulted in the creation of repressive relief programs in England and the United States in the 1820s.

The very complete records of public welfare retained by the City of Philadelphia make it possible to trace the history of the welfare crisis of the 1820s and to examine the various forces, economic, political, and social, which came together to produce a singularly harsh response to need.

The post-war of 1812 depression in Philadelphia affected two mainstays of the city's economy: shipping and manufacturing. When the war ended, American-owned ships again competed with French and British vessels in Europe and the West Indies, and the mercantilist policies of European powers often denied Americans access to the markets they had previously entered in wartime. The value of goods carried by American merchant vessels declined at this time. Meanwhile, the end of the war also brought a flood of British manufactures to the United States and checked the growth of America's infant manufactories, which had been protected from foreign competition first by the Embargo and later by the war itself.¹ By 1817

Philadelphia's manufacturing enterprises were in trouble, and more economic problems loomed ahead. With the loss of wartime trade advantages and the expansion of imports, the United States accumulated a trade imbalance. At the same time, the country's banks, spurred on by the Philadelphia-based Second Bank of the United States, pursued an inflationary policy, and issued more and more notes. With specie needed to cope with the trade imbalance, the banks finally demanded payments in gold and silver and reduced their paper circulation. These actions led to the Panic of 1819 and a subsequent depression. Facing severe competition from abroad and finding their bank credit at home curtailed, businessmen laid off workers and unemployment grew. By the early 1820s there were at least 5,000 and possibly as many as 20,000, Philadelphians (in a population of about 100,000) out of work. In addition, even those that managed to cling to low level unskilled jobs at this time took wage cuts.

When the economic downturn began in 1817, Philadelphia's public welfare authorities, the Guardians of the Poor, convened a meeting with city officials to ascertain how best to employ the poor during the "depressed state of domestic manufactures." However, officials formulated no work relief projects at this meeting. Instead the Guardians tried to reduce the welfare rolls by limiting those poor eligible for monetary assistance to the very old, the young, the handicapped, and the sick. They also sharply reduced the amount paid such persons. The Guardians completed their economy drive by cutting the salaries of poor relief officials and by discharging from the Almshouse inmates who appeared in any way capable of supporting themselves. The most immediate concern of welfare authorities in the depression was not how best to aid the poor, but how to reduce the cost of

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3Philadelphia City Archives (hereafter referred to as PCA), Minutes of the Guardians of the Poor (hereafter referred to as MGP), 28 Dec. 1819, 8 Feb., 15 Feb. 1820.
welfare. In stressing thrift, the Guardians of the Poor acted partly out of necessity. The Panic of 1819 not only left thousands jobless and in need of relief, but also so reduced the income of many others who found paying their taxes exceedingly burdensome. The Guardians worried that they would not collect from everyone and so determined to keep poor taxes high—higher than all other taxes assessed for county services. Between 1817 and 1825 levies for Philadelphia's needy were greater than at any time earlier in the century. Although we do not know the actual tax rate, the poor tax per thousand Philadelphians in 1820 was 28 percent higher than it was in 1810. (See Table 1.) Just as the Guardians expected, many Philadelphians turned collectors away; by the end of the 1822-23 year welfare officials had in their coffers just $40,000 of $100,000 levied. The tax situation did not improve in 1823 and 1824. The Guardians borrowed money regularly to meet expenses, and, as early as 1820, sought to balance their budget by cutting the amount they spent on each relief recipient to about one-half what it was in 1810. (See Table 1.) Yet, at the same time, the number of persons impoverished by the Panic of 1819, as well as by the typhus and yellow fever epidemics of 1818 and 1820, and the harsh winter weather of 1821, mounted. Moreover, immigrants, no longer impeded by the war, flocked to the city and swelled the ranks of the unemployed. The result was that more persons applied for public relief than ever before; in 1820 forty-eight persons in every thousand, more than double the figure of ten years previously, were on the public welfare rolls. (See Table 1.)

Not only public welfare officials, but private citizens as well grew

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5Article signed "Corrector," Poulson's, 20 Dec. 1825. In late 1823 welfare officials found that $91,000 of the $100,000 needed for the poor that year had not yet been collected. PCA, MAHM, 22 Dec. 1823. In 1825 they found that two-thirds of the 1824 tax levy had not yet been collected. PCA, MAHM, 20 Jan. 1825. For other comments critical of the rising tax levies see article signed "Numa" and titled "Pauperism," Poulson's 8 Mar. 1822 and Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Roberts Vaux Papers, Samuel Emlen to Vaux, 10 July 1821. In the 1830's the Guardians of the Poor of the decade commented that citizens were angered by the poor taxes in the 1820's because they exceeded by $196,000 all other taxes levied for county purposes. PCA, MGP, 9 Jan. 1837. On borrowing see Aurora, 24 Sept. 1818, Poulson's, 22 May 1822, Philadelphia Gazette, 6 Nov. 1824.
TABLE I
Poor Relief in Philadelphia, 1800-1829

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Poor Tax Rate</th>
<th>Poor Taxes</th>
<th>Poor Expenditure</th>
<th>Recipients</th>
<th>Poor/Woo</th>
<th>Expense Recipient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>61,559</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>$819</td>
<td>$47,212</td>
<td>$773</td>
<td>1,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>87,303</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>$68,000</td>
<td>1,011</td>
<td>92,202</td>
<td>1,059</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>108,809</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>140,000</td>
<td>1,296</td>
<td>95,010</td>
<td>879</td>
<td>5,237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td>156,025</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>83,508</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>6,488</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ITALIC FIGURES INDICATE ESTIMATES.

Notes and Sources:
I have borrowed the general format for this table from Gary Nash, "Poverty and Poor Relief in Pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 33 (Jan., 1976), 9, to make it easier for interested readers to compare Nash's data with my own. On Population for 1800 through 1829 see George Rogers Taylor, "Comment on Population," in Gilchrist, ed., *The Growth of the Seaport Cities*, p. 39. Poor Tax Rate: The earliest nineteenth century records are for 1803, which indicate that the rate was then 4%, and I have estimated that it was the same in 1800. The 1810 rate is an estimate that it was identical to the 1811 rate. PCA, Poor Tax Duplicates, 1803-11. For 1829 see PCA, MGP, 15 June 1829. Poor Taxes: For 1800 see PCA, MAHM, 7 May 1800; for 1810 see PCA, MAHM, 26 Feb. 1810; for 1820 see PCA, MAHM, 9 Mar. 1820; for 1829 see PCA, MGP, 5 Jan. 1829. Expenditures: For 1800 see PCA, MAHM, 22 Mar. 1801; for 1810 see Poulson's, 19 Feb. 1812; for 1820 see Poulson's, 22 May 1822; for 1829 see *Philadelphia Gazette*, 12 Jan. 1831. Recipients: Include both those housed in the Almshouse, and, after 1820, the Children's Asylum, and those who received outdoor relief. For 1800 see PCA, Guardians of the poor, Treasurer, General Ledger, 1789-1803 vol. and Report of the Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Operation of the Poor Laws in Hazard's Register, II, 54; For 1810 see PCA, Guardians of the Poor, Treasurer's "Weekly Entries," 1809-15 vol. and John Mease, *The Picture of Philadelphia* (New York: Arno Press, 1970; reprint of 1811 ed.), 295; for 1820 see Poulson's, 22 May 1822 and PCA, MGP, 20 Nov. 1821; for 1829 see *Philadelphia Gazette*, 12 Jan. 1831 and Hazard's Register, V, 345 and PCA, MGP, 1829 passim ("visitors of the poor" reports).

Concerned in the years after the War of 1812 when commerce and manufacturing were depressed and when poor taxes jumped sharply. In 1817 Philadelphia's elite launched an investigation of poverty in the city. It began when citizens convened a public meeting and appointed some of their number to study the causes of pauperism. This inquiry eventually led to the formation of the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Economy, and its Library Committee, composed largely of wealthy Philadelphians, including philanthropist Roberts Vaux, completed and published a study of indigence. In this report the Library Committee listed many reasons for destitution including low wages paid women, increased immigration of poor foreigners, and unemployment occasioned by the depressed state of manufactures, cold.
winters, and sickness. But the committee argued that the major cause of pauperism was a moral failing: intemperance.  

What did the word pauperism signify to the Philadelphians who wrote and read the 1817 report? In the nineteenth century paupers were the unworthy poor, those who preferred to rely on public and private relief rather than work. Thus pauperism was the dependence on welfare of intemperate, lazy, and frequently promiscuous individuals. Such paupers were quite different from the worthy poor, who drank sparingly and labored willingly but who, through no fault of their own, became impoverished due to illness or unemployment. They rarely asked for charity, and, if they received aid, made good use of it. Unlike paupers, the worthy poor never became dependent on welfare.

The first concern of the Library Committee in 1817 was pauperism. Of course, committee members did not ignore the worthy poor, but they clearly considered such persons to be of secondary importance. Individual moral weakness engendered most destitution; persons were poor because they were too lazy or intemperate to hold down a regular job.

This was not the first time in the city’s history that the improvidence of the poor had been sharply criticized by more well-off city dwellers. In the wake of the Seven Years’ War when unemployment and poor relief costs also rose dramatically, many Philadelphians blamed the poor who “were content to live the life of the idler, the profligate, or the street beggar rather than pursue an honest trade.” Later in the eighteenth century and in the early nineteenth century, when prosperity returned, Philadelphians took a more benevolent attitude toward the poor who were no longer so visible nor so costly to maintain. However, as soon as depression led to longer relief rolls again in the 1820’s, Philadelphians once more adopted a critical attitude toward the city’s poor.

So too did Americans in other cities. Not only in Philadelphia, but


also in Boston, New York, and Baltimore, well-off citizens became distressed about the poverty they observed in their cities. Independently of one another, they all launched investigations of pauperism in the depressed years between 1817 and 1820 and all found intemperance to be a major cause of unemployment and rapidly rising relief rolls.8

At the same time in England there was a post-war depression which, as in America, resulted in unemployment and a swiftly climbing poor rate. In 1817 a Select Committee of the House of Commons studied pauperism and found, as did Americans, that the indigent were responsible for their own condition. Englishmen also contended that since the poor grew dependent on public relief, the welfare system actually promoted pauperism and should probably be abolished.9 This was an argument that some Philadelphians would adopt.

However, neither in America nor in England did these immediate post-war critiques of the poor lead to any concrete changes in the law. Subsequently, in the early 1820's, Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire initiated state legislative studies of poverty. Committees began to investigate one another, to determine the nature of poverty not only in their own communities but in neighboring states as well. In this fashion concerned citizens throughout the Northeast became aware that poverty was a widespread problem in the early 1820's after the Panic of 1819. Ultimately, they learned from one another and adopted similar solutions to the problem of poverty.

Although the Pennsylvania study, conducted 1821, did not motivate legislators to act, the inquiries made in other states proved more productive. When these investigations concluded that the needy themselves were to blame for the increase in pauperism, state officials endorsed the construction of poor houses with farms attached. Presumably the establishment of work-oriented institutions as the only dispensers of relief would discourage the lazy poor from becoming

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dependent on the public welfare system.\textsuperscript{10}

In the 1820's the English Parliament undertook several other investigations of various aspects of poverty which resulted in no alterations in the laws. Meanwhile, the writings of Thomas Malthus, Thomas Chalmers and others stimulated added interest in the complete abolition of the poor laws, but the harshness of this view led many to reject it by the late 1820's.\textsuperscript{11} However, the theory that allowances in aid of wages (relief payments that served as supplements to the earnings of low-paid laborers) should be eliminated came increasingly into vogue. Such payments, which had begun in Speenhamland in 1795, and which probably grew more widespread during the Napoleonic Wars, had no counterparts in Philadelphia or in other American cities. Still, the substitute to allowances adopted by many English localities in the 1820's—namely, the workhouse as the only bestower of relief to the able-bodied—became a popular welfare panacea in America also.\textsuperscript{12} As we have seen, by 1825 several states had come to advocate the erection of new poor houses, and three years later Pennsylvania did the same.

In these three years Philadelphia's economy revived. This return to prosperity seemed to make many residents even less tolerant of the poor and the welfare system. With more jobs available, why were there still so many on relief, and why was the system so costly? A young lawyer and legislator from a prominent Philadelphia family, William M. Meredith, attempted to provide the answer in a report he made to the state legislature in 1825.

In this report Meredith made frequent reference to investigations of poverty conducted in other states, including New York, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, as well as to the 1817 report of Parliament's Select Committee of the House of Commons. He was strongly influenced by the English experience, and consequently his report is largely a recapitulation of many of the arguments against


\textsuperscript{11}Webbs, \textit{English Poor Law History}, I, 7, 12, 22, 44; Poynter, \textit{Society and Paupersim}, 296.

public welfare leveled by Englishmen in the previous few years. Like
them he insisted that the very existence of the poor laws resulted in
longer and longer welfare rolls and greater and greater expenditures for
relief. This unfortunate trend developed because public relief
inevitably went to many undeserving applicants whom welfare officials
never bothered to investigate because they were giving away other
people's money. As long as public welfare was available, the poor, most
of whom were intemperate, would obtain it and so avoid work.
Meredith also argued that private welfare rolls went up in conjunction
with the public. However, he was probably not familiar with the
attempts of various English localities in the 1820's to put the work
house at the center of the welfare system. Instead he argued that
institutionalizing the poor would not solve the poverty problem. If
almshouses were at all comfortable, the poor would flock to them and
relief costs would soar. Further, Meredith contended, such institutions
were not self-supporting because the idle poor in them could not be
forced to work.

Although it would appear from his report that Meredith, like many
Englishmen of the early 1820's, wanted to terminate all poor relief, the
American did not openly declare in favor of abolition. Instead he simply
proposed three economy measures. First, he suggested that the
settlement laws (which required relief officials to return all poor who
were not legal residents of the locality where they applied for relief to
their home towns or original places of settlement) be repealed because
they were too costly to enforce; and, second, that there be no more
expansion of the poor rates. Finally, he wanted elected representatives
and not the Guardians of the Poor, who were appointed, to set these
rates, presumably because the former would be more anxious to please
taxpayers and keep the levies small.\textsuperscript{13}

Meredith put the Philadelphia Guardians of the Poor on the
defensive. They objected to his suggestions for change, and several of
them wrote to the newspapers defending the amounts they had spent on

\textsuperscript{13} Two weeks before he published his report, Meredith received from a friend a copy of the
1817 Parliamentary report on the poor laws. Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Meredith
Papers, Clement C. Biddle to Meredith, Jan. 13, 1825. Meredith's report was published in the
newspaper and in Samuel Hazard, \textit{Register of Pennsylvania}, II (Philadelphia: W. F. Geddes,
1829), 49-69.
the poor in previous years and insisting on their thriftiness.\textsuperscript{14} The Guardians appointed their own committee on poor law revision and successfully combated an effort by the state legislature to prevent all increases in the poor taxes as well as all borrowing by the Guardians.\textsuperscript{15} Eventually, however, welfare officials acknowledged the enormous public interest in poor law revision and determined to influence the course of change. In 1827 they appointed a committee of Guardians to investigate welfare programs in other cities and recommend improvements in the Philadelphia plan. Robert Earp, a friend of Meredith's, was the chairman.

The committee concluded that the welfare systems of all the cities studied, including New York, Boston, and Baltimore, were superior to Philadelphia's. Its members noted a number of problems with the Philadelphia relief program and set forth proposals for their correction. For example, the Guardians expressed alarm at the appearance of so many poor immigrants in the city in the post-war era and suggested that to raise funds for their care a head tax on all incoming ship passengers, similar to the one in New York, be assessed in Philadelphia. In addition the Guardians voiced the oft-repeated argument that individuals became dependent because of drink and worried that such persons were not properly punished by the present relief system. Therefore, they suggested that in the future the intemperate poor be made to work in the Almshouse to repay the cost of their care. Furthermore, the Guardians, influenced by the Malthusian argument that the more money given the poor the more poor there would be, sought to minimize cash aid to the poor and instead emphasized relief in kind (free food, clothes, fuel) and institutionalization. Finally, troubled by the inexperience of welfare officials, who were appointed on an annual basis by the city councils, committee members suggested that the Guardians serve longer terms.\textsuperscript{16}

The 1827 study differed from Meredith's because the former


\textsuperscript{16}PCA, MGP, 23 Apr. 1827; \textit{Report of the Committee Appointed by the Board of Guardians of the Poor of the City and Districts of Philadelphia to Visit the Cities of Baltimore, New York, Providence, Boston and Salem} (Philadelphia: n.pub., 1827), 23-29.
contained more concrete suggestions for change, and lauded rather than criticized almshouse care. The Guardians' report impressed many Philadelphians, including publisher and reformer Mathew Carey, who wrote a series of articles publicizing it. He went farther than the Guardians, however, and proposed the complete abolition of all cash relief to the poor and the compulsory institutionalization of the indigent in the almshouse. Of course, there had been an almshouse in Philadelphia since the 1730's, but not all poor persons had been cared for there. Instead, the Guardians granted many of the needy weekly cash stipends which allowed them to stay with their families in their own homes. Carey argued that such cash aid was costly and pauperizing and that it should be eliminated entirely and all who sought public welfare should be required to enter the Almshouse. Since inevitably many would refuse such an unpleasant alternative, the cost of poor relief was bound to decline.

At Carey's suggestion, citizens convened a town meeting in July, 1827, where they appointed a committee which drafted an indictment of the poor relief system and a series of suggestions for its improvement. All of these a subsequent town meeting adopted and sent to the legislature in the form of a memorial.

The memorialists, like almost all the reformers since 1817, worried about immigration and so endorsed the suggestion of the Guardians that a head tax be levied with the income to be used to help defray the cost of public welfare in Philadelphia. Immigration was not the chief concern of these reformers of the late 1820's. They were more worried by the dangers of cash aid to the indigent and by the inefficiency of the Guardians of the Poor.

In regard to cash relief for the poor, the memorialists accepted the Guardians' proposal that it be eliminated, except for temporary relief in kind, as soon as a new, larger almshouse could be constructed. Like reformers elsewhere in the United States and England in the 1820's, these Philadelphians put their faith in the poor house, which would serve both to reduce relief expenditures and to punish the lazy and intemperate.

The memorialists also contended that the Philadelphia welfare

system had grown too large; there were too many Guardians, who, during their one-year terms, never really came to know the poor or understand the purpose of the welfare system. Because of their inexperience they spent tax dollars foolishly. As a result, the reformers suggested that the number of Guardians be reduced from fifty to twelve and that they serve three-year terms. The new, smaller group of Guardians would concentrate on administration and leave to employees the chore of dealing personally with the poor.

By making this last suggestion the memorialists recognized that their city had grown too large to rely on the old methods of caring for the poor. Americans in Philadelphia and elsewhere had, two centuries before, adopted from Englishmen the pattern of appointing officials (variously called guardians or overseers of the poor) whose job it was to visit personally and dispense aid to the poor. This system worked in Philadelphia and elsewhere as long as poor relief officials served communities that were relatively small, numerically and geographically. In 1800 Philadelphia and the neighboring districts of Northern Liberties and Southwark that were all a part of the Philadelphia Poor District, contained over 60,000 inhabitants, yet they all lived within a few square miles of one another along the Delaware River. Twenty Guardians of the Poor apparently had little difficulty walking about this area and personally attending the poor. By 1815 the city and districts had grown somewhat and a few more Guardians had been appointed, but each regularly visited on the average just forty-one poor relief pensioners. However, by the early 1820's, over 100,000 persons made their homes in a much larger city and districts which extended all the way from the Delaware to the Schuylkill Rivers, and each of the now fifty Guardians attended on the average, 126 poor persons. It would have been a Herculean task for any official,

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18 Report of the Committee Appointed at a Town Meeting of the Citizens of the City and Country of Philadelphia, on the 23rd of July, 1827, to Consider the Subject of the Pauper System of the City and Districts, and to Report Remedies for its Defects (Philadelphia: Clark and Raser, 1827), 4-16; the memorial to the legislature is in Poulson's, 21 Nov. 1827.

working part-time as most did, to become intimately acquainted with the needs of over one-hundred destitute individuals. Plainly, the growth of the city had made outmoded the old system of personal stewardship of the poor. Philadelphia welfare reformers concluded that this system had to be replaced with a bureaucracy. The Guardians would cease to be almsgivers and instead become administrators. They would leave to employees the task of personally ministering to the poor.

Philadelphia representatives in the state legislature drafted a bill incorporating all of the suggestions in the memorial adopted by the town meeting. This bill, which became law in 1828, also reduced the amount each citizen could be taxed for the support of the poor and created a special commission to erect a new almshouse. 20

Important economic and political differences between Philadelphia and adjacent communities influenced this 1828 poor law reform. In that year, the Philadelphia Poor District included not only the city, Northern Liberties and Southwark, but also the districts of Spring Garden and Kensington. In this era when public transportation was non-existent, the most desirable and expensive area in which to live was inevitably the center of Philadelphia proper where most businesses were located. Here dwelt the most affluent citizens. Working class and poorer persons made their homes in the outlying districts where housing was usually cheaper. 21 Philadelphians resented the fact that because the total wealth of the city was greater than that of the districts, city dwellers paid the largest proportion of the poor taxes, yet relief rolls bulged with the indigent from the outlying areas. There were always more poor in the Almshouse from Philadelphia than from the districts, but the reverse was true of recipients of outdoor relief. This discrepancy may have come about because officials found it inconvenient to remove the poor some distance from the Northern Liberties and Southwark to the Almshouse which was located in the city. Philadelphians also disliked being outnumbered on the Board of Guardians by the District


representatives (twenty-eight to twenty-two) by the 1820's. The Democratic-Republican controlled governments in the districts appointed these representatives, while councils dominated by Federalists chose the city Guardians.\(^{22}\) It was no accident that Philadelphians, many of them Federalists (including William Meredith and Robert Earp), initiated the poor law reform of the late 1820's and district leaders opposed it. The Philadelphians triumphed. They controlled the committee appointed to draft changes in the poor law at the 1827 town meeting. These changes included the eventual elimination of outdoor cash relief, which had gone largely to the needy outside of the city proper, and the creation of a new poor board with the same number of Guardians from Philadelphia as there were from all of the districts. When the bill incorporating these poor law changes came before the state legislature, district representatives fought the provision terminating outdoor pensions and lost. In addition, one district unsuccessfully sought to obtain more representation on the Board of Guardians, and another tried and failed to separate from the poor district entirely.\(^{23}\)

Philadelphians like William Meredith and Robert Earp wanted to reform the poor laws, not only for philosophical, but also for practical economic and political reasons.

And what of the reaction of the poor themselves to this harsh new relief program? Those whom it affected most directly were needy women and children, for they had been the chief beneficiaries of

\(^{22}\)Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Meredith Papers, Robert Earp to Meredith, 25 Jan. 1827 and James Robertson to Meredith, Dec. 18, 1827. For Almshouse admission figures which include the number admitted from Philadelphia, Northern Liberties and Southwark respectively see Poulsion's, 22 May 1822, Philadelphia Gazette, 6 Nov. 1824, 20 Dec. 1825, 7 Nov. 1826, 2 Nov. 1827, 19 Jan. 1830, 12 Jan. 1831, PCA, Guardians of the Poor, Treasurer, General Ledger, 1822 vol., 56, 58, 60 and 1830 vol., 176, 178, 180. The only record of outdoor relief recipients by place of residence is for 1820 when there were 612 in the city and 718 in the districts. Poulsion's, 22 May 1822. However, for other years consistently 60 percent or more of the outdoor relief funds were expended on the poor in Northern Liberties and Southwark. It is probable that since more was spent on the poor in the districts, there were more poor there than in the city who received outdoor aid. For amounts spent on the outdoor poor in the city and districts see the accounts of the Guardians in the Philadelphia Gazette, 6 Nov. 1824, 20 Dec. 1825, 7 Nov. 1826, 2 Nov. 1827, and Accounts of the Guardians of the Poor... 28 May 1822 to 27 May 1823 (Philadelphia: n.pub., 1823).

outdoor cash aid which was to be eliminated once a new almshouse was built. From 1811 through 1829 between 86 and 91 percent of those on the outdoor relief rolls were females. Of these women, an 1814-15 census reveals that roughly two-thirds were single persons who were sick, disabled, or aged. The remaining one-third were mothers (most of whom were widows), each of whom had two to three children to support.24 In this era when respectable females could find employment only as seamstresses, servants, or washerwomen, all very low-paying jobs, it is not surprising that husbandless women who were sick or had young children to support often required assistance from public welfare officials. Such women, when they found their aid cut off, were in no position to protest. Politically powerless, they did nothing to interfere with the passage of the 1828 Poor Law.

In turn the men who drafted and enacted this poor law change may well have been aware that they were economizing on aid to the group least likely to be able to thwart reform. To forestall any possible criticism of their program for terminating aid to helpless females, male reformers focused on a small group of women (between 4 and 20 percent of those on the outdoor relief rolls between 1814 and 1826) who, they said, were very undeserving of aid: mothers of bastard children.25 By vociferously objecting to aid to such immoral persons, reformers erroneously implied that most females on outdoor relief were "fallen" women who used public monies to support their illegitimate offspring. Since outdoor cash aid fostered vice, it should be eliminated and all public aid dispensed through the Almshouse.

By relying on the almshouse as the primary relief-giving unit, Philadelphians in 1828 followed the pattern of other American and English poor law reformers of the 1820's. The English did not actually revamp their system until 1832-34, but then they too placed their faith in institutionalization. However, Philadelphians, in abolishing cash aid to the poor in 1828, took a far more drastic step than did other reformers at home and abroad. Bostonians and New Yorkers continued

24 PCA, Register of Relief Recipients, 1814-15; PCA, MGP, 30 Aug. 1826; Hazard's Register, VI, 266.
25 Ibid. and Carey [Howard], "Pauperism, No. II;" Poulson's, 18 July 1827; Report of the Committee Appointed by the Guardians (1827), 29.
to supply some monetary relief to the needy and so too did the English.\textsuperscript{26}

The welfare crisis of the 1820's is not the first (nor would it be the last) of its kind in American history. As previously noted, after the Seven Years' War there was a depression which, like the economic downturn after the War of 1812, led to high unemployment rates and enlarged relief rolls in Philadelphia and other American urban centers as well. The response of Philadelphians after both wars was to blame the immorality of the poor and the inefficiency of welfare officials for the rising cost of public relief. The city's welfare board was re-vamped in the 1760s when Quaker philanthropists replaced public officials as Managers of the city's Almshouse, and again in the 1820s when the number of Guardians was reduced and their terms in office lengthened. In both cases, the object was to make the city's welfare board more efficient and more strict in dealing with the poor. In addition, to punish the poor for their improvidence in the depressions after both wars, repressive measures were taken: cash aid to the indigent was eliminated and all who sought public aid were required to enter the almshouse. Eventually, once the depressions abated, so too did the harsh relief programs: cash aid was resumed in the late eighteenth century and again in the 1840's.\textsuperscript{27}

However, late in the nineteenth century, during another depression, Philadelphia and a number of other cities once again abolished cash aid to the indigent. The pattern was again repeated. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Americans just did not seem to learn any lessons from past welfare crises. They continued to ignore the very real problems of the poor in depressions and to blame the indigent rather than the faulty operation of the economic system for large scale poverty. Not until the twentieth century and the Great Depression would most Americans cease to blame high unemployment and rising welfare rolls on the laziness of the poor and adopt expansive rather than repressive public relief programs.


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