I would like to thank the anonymous readers for their generous help in making this a better article. Special thanks to Tamara Gaskell for her suggestions, insights, and encouragement and to David Waldstreicher for his continuing advice and support.

1The First Constitution and Rules Adopted by the Welsh Society, in Minutes, vol. 1, Records of the Welsh Society of Philadelphia, 1798–, Special Collections, Haverford College. The early documents and minutes of the society refer to it as the “Welsh Society”; in keeping with library and archive records, this article uses the modern spelling of “Welsh” unless directly quoting a source.

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not prepared for the diseases endemic to their new home. Widowed and alone in a city of strangers, Bridget and her daughters fell quickly into poverty. Bereft of family support, they turned to public relief and entered the Philadelphia Almshouse. By 1800, the “Bettering House,” as it was then called, had achieved a notorious reputation among the poor of the city. The Edwards’s experience would not serve to brighten the institution’s image. Two months after admitting the Edwards family, the managers of the Bettering House elected to indenture the two eldest girls, four-year-old twins Margaret and Martha, for twelve years as servants to farmers in Blockley Township. Less than a week later, Catherine Edwards, Bridget’s next youngest child, became one of the many to perish of disease within the walls of the Almshouse. When summer came, Edwards, still clinging to her infant daughter, the last family member she had left, gained her freedom from the institution. After leaving the Bettering House, her prospects were little brighter than they had been half a year earlier, except that now the weather was warmer and, of course, she had fewer mouths to feed.²

Elizabeth Owens also came to Philadelphia in 1800, and her tale began in a similar fashion. She and her family, along with some two hundred fellow Welsh immigrants, were deposited at New Castle. John Owens, like Bridget Edwards’s husband, died of sickness shortly after his arrival in America. Elizabeth was left to care for their five children and was pregnant with a sixth. Here the tales of Bridget and Elizabeth part, however, for Owens did not seek aid from the public relief institutions of Philadelphia, but had, instead, been sought out by an organization calling itself the Welsh Society. This private, benevolent society had been created two years before by a group of prosperous Welshmen living in and around Philadelphia. Its founding purpose was to advise and assist those who, like Edwards and Owens, had emigrated from Wales and encountered “distress” in America. The society had first encountered the Owenses at New Castle, where it had sent its stewards upon learning that a ship carrying Welsh immigrants was soon to arrive. The society’s funds brought the immigrants from New Castle to Philadelphia and provided support for as many as needed it while they adapted to life in their new home.

Because of the severity of her situation, Elizabeth Owens remained “under the care of the Stewards” for six months, who provided her with a rented house and “such other aid as appeared to be immediately necessary.” Should she or her children grow ill, the society was prepared to bring professional medical assistance to her home; should she suffer exploitation, the society offered legal counsel from sympathetic Welsh lawyers. Perhaps most importantly, Elizabeth Owens established connections with a society of individuals who were her countrymen in two respects, Welsh and American, and who consequently considered it their duty to see that she and her children successfully established themselves in the City of Brotherly Love.3

As these poignant accounts show, it could matter a great deal from whom the poor received relief. By the end of the eighteenth century, Philadelphia boasted a nigh unparalleled number of organizations, public and private, dedicated to combating the spread and effects of poverty. This article seeks to further expand our understanding of eighteenth-century poor relief in Philadelphia by calling attention to a group of four private benevolent societies that, like the Welsh Society, were created to provide more expansive care for members of specific ethnic heritages. By examining the purpose behind the creation of these societies, we can better see where and how the existing system of public poor relief in Philadelphia fell short. By exploring the ways in which they went about addressing poverty, we can better understand the specific needs of the city’s eighteenth-century immigrants. Finally, by placing these societies alongside other institutions that dealt with poverty in and around Philadelphia, we can suggest theories as to why they responded as they did to the plight of the poor.

The evolution of poverty and poor relief in early Philadelphia has garnered considerable attention in the last half-century, particularly from scholars such as Billy G. Smith, Gary Nash, John Alexander, and Sharon Salinger, and several trends have become apparent. First, it is clear that poverty was a growing problem in Philadelphia during the eighteenth century and that by about midcentury it encompassed young and healthy men and women as well as the expected widows, orphans, and the sick and disabled. Second, historians have demonstrated that, as Smith writes, “only an extremely thin margin separated those who required assistance from those who were able to independently secure the necessities of life”; sickness, injury, childbirth, economic decline, and cold weather were all

capable of pushing Philadelphia’s lower sorts across this slippery threshold. Third, historians have emphasized a shift, beginning roughly in the mid-eighteenth century, toward a more institutionalized approach to poor relief and an inclination among the distributors of that relief to attribute the increasing poverty to deficiencies within the poor themselves. This change in perspective, in tandem with social and political insecurities, led the elite distributors of relief increasingly to focus on controlling and reforming the poor in addition to (or rather than) lifting them out of poverty.\(^4\)


Most of the work on poor relief in Philadelphia has been primarily centered on the organizations and institutions of public, or semipublic, relief: the Overseers of the Poor, the Almshouse, Pennsylvania Hospital, etc. This focus on public relief, driven by the richness of the sources and the large number of recipients, risks obscuring the way in which smaller, private institutions complemented and expanded the poor relief provided at public expense. It also tends to focus historians on some of the lowest of the lower sort, those unable to find “respectable” sources of assistance such as family, churches, or private societies. As a rule, those who could obtain private relief did so; only those who could not submitted themselves to the “reforms” of the public system.

This article is not intended to challenge these earlier analyses of public relief in Philadelphia. Rather, it turns attention to the larger holistic system of poor relief in the city, which encompassed both public and private sources, by highlighting a set of private institutions, all of which first operated as unincorporated societies. These institutions served the needs of the “respectable poor,” who turned to these societies instead of (or, at times, in addition to) public institutions, and provided a type of assistance meant to keep the poor above the line of complete dependency that I will call “preemptive poor relief.” Consequently, we should not view the ethnic societies as being in competition with the city’s public relief institutions, but as supplemental to them, going above and beyond publicly provided...
assistance and, in many ways, filling in the gaps left by the tightening restrictions imposed by public policy “reformers.”

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Philadelphia saw an explosive growth in private societies and clubs in the latter half of the eighteenth century. These new organizations dedicated themselves to addressing all sorts of issues: social, political, intellectual, and benevolent. Even among those private societies dedicated to relieving the distress of the poor, considerable variety existed. Some formed in response to sudden disasters and disbanded afterwards, as the Committee to Alleviate the Miseries of the Poor did in the face of an unusually cruel winter in 1761/62. Others organized themselves on a more permanent basis to address the needs of particularly disadvantaged groups, such as widows, orphans, or prisoners. Still others were composed of members of particular crafts or occupations and acted as mutual assistance societies, providing security for their memberships in case of accident or economic downturn. 5

The four benevolent societies examined here dedicated themselves to the immigrant poor of particular ethnicities. They are, in order of formal organization, the St. Andrew’s Society (1749), the Society of the Sons of St. George (1772), the Hibernian Society (1790), and the aforementioned Welsh Society (1798). Respectively, they served the needs of Philadelphia’s poor Scottish, English, Irish, and Welsh immigrants, their families, and (to some extent) their descendants. A number of similar contemporary societies existed for other ethnic groups, among them the Deutschen Gesellschaft von Pennsylvania and the French Benevolent Society of Philadelphia. In 1797 St. Thomas’s African Church established a mutual assistance society for the benefit of those of African descent. 6

The four societies considered here shared a common British heritage, spoke and wrote in English, and were in these ways less “foreign” to and separate from greater Philadelphia society than were some of the other ethnic societies. They were also remarkably similar to one another in their

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5 For a discussion on how political-oriented associations formed in the late 1700s and early 1800s, see Albrecht Koschnik, “Let a Common Interest Bind Us Together?: Associations, Partisanship, and Culture in Philadelphia, 1775–1840” (Charlottesville, VA, 2007); Alexander, Render Them Submissive, 122–41; Nash, “Up from the Bottom,” 58.

6 Constitution and Rules to Be Observed and Kept by the Friendly Society of St. Thomas’s African Church, of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1797).
organization and operation. In the ways they elected their officers, scheduled their meetings, raised their funds, distributed their relief, and celebrated their fraternity, each society would have been quite familiar to members of the other three, and their memberships did at times overlap. Most importantly, the societies themselves recognized one another as belonging to a special group of benevolent organizations. The later societies instituted habits of electing the officers of the other British societies to honorary membership and inviting them to celebratory dinners.\(^7\)

All of these societies evolved out of preexisting, but less formal, social connections. Their official organization and focus on relieving the poor seem to have been prompted by the evolutions in poverty and poor relief going on around them. The St. Andrew’s Society was formally organized in 1749, though it seems likely that many of the founding members had been meeting periodically to discuss the poverty of Scottish immigrants for some time before that.\(^8\) By the 1740s, it was becoming increasingly apparent that Philadelphia was losing the fight against poverty; the poor tax had doubled over the previous three decades, as had the percentage-population of the poor. A population boom had begun, which, between 1740 and 1775, would triple the number of people in the city, bringing in thousands of immigrants, many of whom would prove to be ill-prepared for the labor demands of Philadelphia. As Gary Nash has shown, by the middle of the eighteenth century the existing system of public relief, the Almshouse and the Overseers of the Poor, could no longer keep up with the increasing demands of the impoverished. The immigrant poor, many of whom were technically excluded from public relief due to residency requirements, increasingly sought assistance from their fellow countrymen. Thus, the founders of the St. Andrew’s Society wrote of “meeting frequently with our Country people here in distress who generally make application to some one or other of us for relief.” Previously they had responded to these cries for help either out of pocket or through ad hoc collections, but such remedies were neither efficient nor sustainable. In

\(^7\) The Welsh Society annually invited the officers of the other three societies to join their anniversary dinner. See Minutes, Dec. 2, 1799, Dec. 1, 1800, and Dec. 7, 1801, Records of the Welsh Society of Philadelphia. Additionally, the Hibernian Society was in the habit of electing officers from other societies to honorary membership. See John H. Campbell, *History of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and of the Hibernian Society for the Relief of Emigrants from Ireland, March 17, 1771–March 17, 1892* (Philadelphia, 1892), 152.

creating the St. Andrew’s Society, the founders hoped to “more easily more regularly and more bountifully” supply the needs of their fellow Scottish immigrants.9

Similar concerns drove the founders of the Society of the Sons of St. George, who were also “struck with the frequent instances of wretchedness which they found among their country-men who came to America.” This benevolent society for Englishmen was formed in the early 1770s, during the height of a battle among city officials over the nature of public poor relief. In 1766, struggling under the weight of a postwar economic slump, the city had approved a plan by a group of wealthy Quaker merchants to replace the existing Almshouse with a new institution that would not only shelter and care for the dependent or “worthy” poor but also employ the able-bodied or “idle” poor in a workhouse. This transition brought new construction, new administration, and a new philosophy of poor relief to Philadelphia. The managers of the “Bettering House,” as the new institution was called, embarked on a campaign to terminate the out-relief payments that the Overseers of the Poor had long been distributing and to drive anyone who would receive public support into the Bettering House where they could be “reformed” through profitable labor. The Overseers of the Poor argued that out-relief should be continued, especially for those who only needed temporary relief or were partially capable of supporting themselves and would be forced to abandon their homes and possessions if they went into the House. In 1769, the managers of the Bettering House won the battle over finances and all out-relief and pensions were stopped. Ending out-relief, however, would not ease the financial burdens of poor relief, and the city took other drastic steps. In 1771, it enacted new legislation to limit the number of poor eligible for relief; among other restrictions the new poor law doubled the time required for migrants to obtain the right of settlement from one year to two. These changes to the public system of poor relief, which immediately preceded the formation of the English society, struck new immigrants from overseas particularly hard. Unlike the itinerant poor who came to Philadelphia from other cities or colonies, they had no nearby place of residency to return to if their ventures failed. Even if they should

9 Nash, “Up from the Bottom,” 65; “Advertisement,” 1749, in St. Andrew’s Society of Philadelphia Minutes and Accounts, 1749–1843, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA. The residency requirements for public relief were at times ignored, as they were in the case of the Edwards family, either in response to extreme circumstances or through the generosity of a public official.
achieve the “right” to be confined within the Bettering House, such an arrangement offered them no opportunity to establish themselves as productive citizens or to build up a source of independent income. It was in the face of this increasingly severe situation that a number of immigrants from England, like the founders of the St. Andrew’s Society a quarter century earlier, met to establish an organized and efficient means of aiding their countrymen. In their own words, they meant “to reduce that charity which in their separate capacities they extended to their poor and unfortunate countrymen accidentally, into a regular system of relief.” The Sons of St. George would, on various occasions, offer the very sorts of aid the system of public relief had just eliminated.\(^\text{10}\)

The two later organizations, the Hibernian Society for the Relief of Emigrants from Ireland and the Welsh Society of Pennsylvania, for the Advice and Assistance of Emigrants from Wales, were both formed in the 1790s in response to hardships faced by new immigrants. The Hibernian Society was in many respects the offspring of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, a fraternal society of wealthy Irishmen begun in 1771. The Friendly Sons were, without question, more dedicated to sociability, politics, and, during the Revolution, patriotism, than to charity. Nonetheless, they did devote some of their funds to assist their less affluent countrymen, and it seems that, in the years after the Revolution, several of their number grew increasingly concerned about the state of Irish immigrants. Transporting poor Irish men and women to America became a profitable business in the late eighteenth century, and profit-seeking shipowners pursued ever greater returns by increasing the number of passengers they carried and decreasing the quality of life aboard ship. As a result, conditions for Irish immigrants were often atrocious, as overcrowding was combined with unsanitary conditions and insufficient provision of food and water. On at least three occasions in the eighteenth century Pennsylvania passed legislation regulating the passenger trade, but these laws were not adequately enforced and often ignored since the newly arrived immigrants were generally unaware of them and were ill prepared or equipped to carry on a prosecution against the shipmasters. Furthermore, the Irish could face additional discrimination on the basis of their political, religious, and ethnic heritage.\(^\text{11}\)


11 Samuel Hood, A Brief Account of the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, with
formed to combat this problem and to provide general assistance to newly arrived immigrants from Ireland. In this the founding members were inspired by the work of Philadelphia’s other ethnic and national benevolent societies. The 1790 constitution of the Hibernian Society praised “the national societies, established in this country” and recognized that:

By these societies, emigrants have been rendered happy in their situations and useful citizens; oppression has been punished; migration hither encouraged; misery alleviated; and consequently, the temptations to wander from the paths of rectitude diminished.12

Though the constitution does not specify, it seems likely that “the national societies” referred to were, among others, the St. Andrew’s Society and the Society of the Sons of St. George, both of which the members of the Hibernian Society would toast on numerous occasions, and the German Society, Deutschen Gesellschaft von Pennsylvania, which was known for its valiant efforts on the part of German immigrants. Though its initial membership came in large part from the Friendly Sons, which continued to operate as a sociable club for some time, the new society opened its doors to any man who was willing and able to contribute to its cause.13

Like the Hibernian Society, the Welsh Society was preceded by earlier ethnic associations, possibly dating back to the Society of the Sons of Ancient Britons, founded in 1729. This heritage was well remembered by the founders of the Welsh Society, who believed that “Friendship and Fraternization” had “usually existed between the ancient Britons and this Country” owing to a steady in-migration. In 1798, a group of Welsh Philadelphians became concerned that this connection with the land of their birth and its people had become “less fervent than at former periods.” They consequently feared that a newly arrived Welsh immigrant would no longer be able to successfully integrate into the city’s society or “form favourable Ideas of its Inhabitants, and be attached to his situa-
tion.” Furthermore, the Welsh migrants, like the Irish, were vulnerable to avaricious shipmasters and often arrived in America in desperate need of support. In order to remedy this situation and to encourage their countrymen’s attachment to their new home, the members of the Welsh Society dedicated themselves to “taking our Emigrant brother by the Hand, instructing him in what he is ignorant of and providing for his Immediate necessities.”

Though all of these societies were preceded by earlier fraternal and sociable clubs, it is important to recognize these four organizations as being primarily and essentially devoted to charity. Their dedication to benevolence took precedence over other motivations for formally assembling, including politics and fraternity. This is not to say that the societies did not serve sociable functions; ethnic fraternity retained an importance for several of the societies. Formal meetings were generally preceded by dinner and followed by drinking, transitions made easier by the fact that some of the societies first met in taverns. Furthermore, every year each society held an anniversary banquet on the day of its patron saint. These dinners were purely social occasions, involving late nights, many celebratory toasts, and considerably more people than the quarterly meetings. Nonetheless, there are several indications that this sort of socialization remained secondary to the societies’ purposes. First, as mentioned above, most of the societies were preceded by some earlier form of more purely social gathering, the most obvious example being the existence of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick before and alongside the Hibernian Society. Fraternal, ethnically based social clubs were already available. Second, the structures and rules of the societies did not lend themselves to jovial social exchanges. Disorderly behavior in the meetings could be punished by fines or even expulsion, as could interrupting official business with trivial matters. The St. Andrew’s Society required that all remarks be directed to the chairman once its meetings officially commenced. Third, members who were not directly involved in running the charitable aspects of the societies often avoided the meetings. Most of the administrative powers over the societies’ benevolence were invested in the officers while the larger membership was responsible for contributing funds, making recommendations, and steering any needy countrymen they encountered to the societies’ stewards. That a relatively small proportion of the nonofficer mem-

bership appeared at the quarterly meetings implies that these gatherings were primarily focused on the operation of the societies' charity. Finally, the founding documents and rules of the societies are overwhelmingly focused on the need for assisting the immigrant poor rather than on furthering social intercourse among the membership. The St. Andrew's Society, to cite one example, proclaimed itself “Solely Instituted” with the intent of “giving Relief to the poor and distressed.” While it was certainly in the interest of the members to promote themselves as solely dedicated to benevolence, the society's structure and function seems to confirm that charity was, indeed, its primary, if not its only, purpose.  

If the societies privileged benevolence over sociability, they also exalted it over politics. In a time when private political associations in Philadelphia were taking on ever greater significance, these benevolent ethnic societies remained remarkably apolitical. This stance is all the more surprising when one considers the political battles raging at the time some of them were formed. One might suspect that a society of Englishmen formed in the American colonies in 1772 would have been soon overwhelmed by political turmoil. Yet the tensions between Britain and her colonies are almost entirely absent from the society minutes, appearing only twice: first, in a meeting on July 24, 1775, when the society determined that “the general Distress of this unhappy Country” was preventing the membership “from extending their wonted Charity” and that it would cease meeting regularly for the foreseeable future, and again in a special meeting called by the vice president on March 4, 1776, to expel one member of the society for “having shown himself inimical to the liberties of this country.” The latter is the only instance in which the society took any position on the colonial dispute, and it seems likely that it did so primarily to save face. The expelled member, one John Kearsley, was at the time of his expulsion in prison for writing abusive letters, well on his way to insanity, and would soon be attainted of treason. The Welsh Society also arose at a time of unusually turbulent politics. Established in 1798, it came into being alongside the Alien and Sedition Acts and just in time for the vicious political struggles that led up to the

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15 The anniversary dinner appears among the rules of all four societies. The requirement that speakers address the chairman appears in Rule 22 of the St. Andrew's Society and the declaration to be “Solely Instituted” along lines of relief appears in the society's 1749 “Advertisement,” St. Andrew's Society of Philadelphia Minutes and Accounts.

16 Lorenzo Sabine, Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution, with an Historical Essay (Boston, 1864), 1:597.
election of 1800. Yet throughout the period the society remained politically uninvolved.

This avoidance of partisanship and political disruption was not merely fortuitous. The Welsh Society was particularly careful to avoid divisive distractions, ruling in its initial constitution that “The Religious or Political opinions of a Candidate shall not Influence his election [to an office within the society]; nor shall controversies on those subjects be introduced whilst the President is in the Chair.” But most of the societies forbade their members to introduce any subject that might distract from “the business of the Society” once the meetings began. In a city as politically and religiously diverse as Philadelphia, it seems likely that these were the same distracting subjects the authors of such rules had in mind. 17

Charity, then, was the core function of the benevolent ethnic societies, but it was charity subject to particular limitations. The constitutions and charters of these societies emphasized their devotion to charity and benevolence, but they also displayed an intriguing tension between an inclusive moral obligation to aid all those in distress and an exclusive responsibility to those from their own home countries. Reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of Philadelphia, the founders of the Society of the Sons of St. George wrote in their constitution that “National attachments and prejudices are for the most part idle and unnecessary” and that such “invidious national distinctions . . . ought particularly to be avoided between the different nations composing the British state in America, where all freemen (from wheresoever they originally migrated) are brethren, friends, and countrymen.” Regarding relief to the distressed, they declared that “Pity, social love, and charity, are citizens of the world, and extend their benign influences to the whole human race.” The St. Andrew’s Society declared that its design was “undoubtedly universal Good.” The creators of the Welsh Society would later concur that “the wretched of no clime nor condition should be excluded from our aid and commiseration.” 18

Yet the benevolence of these institutions was restricted along as many as three lines: ethnic heritage, generational distance from immigration,

17 Article 4 of the First Constitution, Records of the Welsh Society of Philadelphia; Rule 21 of the First Constitution, St. Andrew’s Society of Philadelphia Minutes and Accounts; Article 12 in the 1772 Constitution, Society of the Sons of St. George Records.

and moral character. The first restriction is the most obvious; each society limited its assistance to those who came, or descended from those who came, from specific parts of Great Britain. Intriguingly, this restriction appears to have been a source of peculiar discomfort for several of the societies, and they went to great lengths to justify their exclusivity in light of the universal and inclusive remarks quoted above. The Scottish and English societies, in particular, felt the need to defend themselves against accusations of unjust bias, and both devoted considerable space in their constitutions to making an “Apology” for the “somewhat confin’d” nature of their charity. The apologies proffered by these societies took the same form and were founded on two key propositions. First, they asserted that truly universal benevolence, however laudable and desirable, was beyond the realm of possibility. As the founders of the English society declared:

Man, however boundless are the desires excited in him by benevolence and social affection, is still limited in his abilities and capacity; and though his wishes may incline him to be serviceable to all his fellow-creatures, he soon discovers that he has it in his power to be of use but to very few.19

Faced with the impossibility of relieving all those who are distressed, the benevolent soul must be selective. The moral basis for such selectiveness lies in the second part of the societies’ apology, that a man’s “countrymen are his peculiar care.” The members of the Welsh Society would effectively capture the sentiments of all British societies when they declared in 1802 that it was “both just and natural that those of the country and people of our ancestors have claims of greater sensibility and of stronger obligation than others.” This preeminence of duty to one’s countrymen, over and above responsibility for all of humanity, combined with the charitable nature of their institutions, helped soothe the societies’ fears that they might have fallen into “invidious national distinctions.” Rather, in fulfilling their duties to their own countrymen, these benefactors were doing their part to relieve the poor of the world. Ethnic exclusivity and universal inclusion were not, in their minds, opposites.20

The second set of restrictions focused the societies’ benevolence on newly arrived immigrant families rather than on those long established in the Americas. The effects of this immigrant focus varied over time. The

19 1772 Constitution, Society of the Sons of St. George Records.
St. Andrew’s Society first limited its benevolence to those born in Scotland and the sons of those born in Scotland, as well as their widows and small children. Thus, they offered relief to first- and second-generation families. This restriction was linked to a similar limit on the society’s membership: only natives of Scotland or their sons were eligible. A new constitution, adopted in 1769, extended membership eligibility to another generation, allowing the society to absorb still more members as the city aged. The Society of the Sons of St. George would adopt restrictions like those of the St. Andrew’s Society’s initial constitution, limiting both membership and relief to the first and second generation of immigrants from England.

Two reasons for these restrictions suggest themselves. First, it was the newly arrived immigrant who was more likely to need advice and assistance. The records of these societies demonstrate that numerous Britons came to Philadelphia with ill-conceived plans for establishing a business there, often having misjudged either the cost of supplies or the demand for their wares. Those born in the city would naturally be more familiar with its markets and, of course, would likely have family to fall back on if their enterprises failed. Second, it may be that generational distance from the native country was seen as diluting the “special Fellowship” and “peculiar care” that underlay the societies’ benevolence. These restrictions may represent quiet acknowledgment of a prerevolutionary British American identity that could slowly replace one’s Scottish or English heritage.21

The later societies, formed in the 1790s, did not explicitly limit the generational distance to which their benevolence extended, but it seems unlikely that such a restriction would have been necessary. Where the Scottish and English societies generally expected their needy countrymen to approach them with petitions for assistance, the Welsh Society and the Hibernian Society actively sought out incoming immigrants in need of help. Both societies met passenger ships at the docks and busied themselves meeting the new arrivals’ immediate needs of housing, health, and sustenance. This care for immigrants “just off the boat” seems to have been their overriding purpose, though they at times also received petitions from within the city. Furthermore, both societies were less restrictive as to the ethnicity of their membership. The Welsh Society required that all members be “of known Welch descent,” but placed no restrictions on how

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21 Though the language of the St. Andrew’s Society’s and the Society of the Sons of St. George’s founding documents use a masculine generic in describing who is eligible for aid, the early minutes show that, from the beginning, women born in Scotland or England were also granted relief.
many generations might separate an applicant from Wales. The Hibernian Society, for its part, placed no ethnic restrictions on its membership, but welcomed any man who was willing and able to provide relief to immigrants from Ireland.

Several historians, most notably Gary B. Nash and John K. Alexander, have noted that as the eighteenth century wore on the elites of Philadelphia increasingly blamed poverty on the poor, looked upon the indigent with suspicion, and came to see poor relief as a means of social control. Nash has suggested that the experience and social position of Philadelphia’s leaders left them “ideologically handicapped” in their search for the causes of poverty, and Alexander argues that many aspects of the public relief system were intended to reform the manners, rather than relieve the suffering, of the poor. Such concerns were not entirely alien to benevolent ethnic societies. Although they served, in many ways, to supplement an increasingly institutional and restricted public relief system, the St. Andrew’s Society and the Society of the Sons of St. George openly incorporated a third, moral, restriction on who could receive their assistance. The key term they almost invariably invoked was “character.” Thus, when Alex Irvin petitioned the Scottish society for aid, the society first determined that he was “of good character” before giving him three pounds. The Sons of St. George would use precisely the same phrase to describe John Parker, an unemployed bricklayer, when they granted him a small weekly subsidy to see him through the winter. They likewise tasked their stewards to “enquire into the Petitioner’s Case and Character” before determining whether they would act to relieve Joseph Bull, a poor weaver. The petitioners of these societies were doubtless aware that their respectability was subject to evaluation and tried to sway the balance in their favor; when Robert Shepard approached the St. Andrew’s Society for help, he brought with him letters of recommendation from people “of credit & character,” hoping that their good repute would help bolster his own. The meaning of “good character” in this context comes across in those occasional instances where the secretaries of the societies record a more elaborate judgment. Calico printer John Hewson was described as “an industrious Sober man,” Francis Gray, a poor elderly woman, was “honest” and “of good reputation”; both received funds from the society.22

22 Nash, “Poverty and Poor Relief in Pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia,” 28–29; Alexander, Render Them Submissive, 6–7, 95, 120–21; Minutes, Sept. 2, 1752, and Aug. 31, 1752, St. Andrew’s Society
Again, the Hibernian Society and Welsh Society differed from the two earlier organizations; neither appears to have been greatly concerned with the character of those to whom they brought relief. The difference stems mainly from the status of their primary recipients: immigrants who just arrived in Philadelphia from across the Atlantic. It is unlikely that anyone in Philadelphia could have vouched for the moral rectitude of these individuals since they were often complete strangers to the city. Similarly, they tended to be poorer than the more established petitioners who approached the English and Scottish societies, more often in need of food or medical attention than a loan to start up a business. When faced with equally necessitous circumstances, even the older societies appear to have loosened their moral regulations; Mary Agnew approached the St. Andrew’s Society “in the greatest distress and in danger of perishing,” and it granted her ten shillings of emergency relief, despite the fact that she was “of an undeserving Character.”

The societies extended their concern over moral character and propriety toward their membership rolls as well as to their relief recipients. Though theoretically membership was open to anyone of the proper heritage (or, in the case of the Hibernian Society, anyone at all) able and willing to help provide benevolence, in practice the societies looked for certain kinds of men respectable enough to join their ranks. Each society defined these requirements of respectability in similar, yet subtle ways. The St. Andrew’s Society sought members of “honor and integrity”; the Hibernian Society preferred to welcome “characters of respectability and influence”; the Society of the Sons of St. George described itself as composed “of several of the principal and most respectable Englishmen in the city.” The rules they established allowed the societies to dictate a certain level of gentlemanly decorum in their membership; rude or “unmannerly” behavior, as well as a lack of deference toward a society’s officers, was grounds for a monetary fine or expulsion. Furthermore, each society required that prospective members win the approval of a majority of the existing membership and so was free to be as socially exclusive or open as it desired.

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of Philadelphia Minutes and Accounts; Minutes, Jan. 1, 1774, Jan. 23, 1773, July 23, 1774, and Jan. 23, 1775, Society of the Sons of St. George Records.

23 Minutes, Dec. 18, 1751, St. Andrew’s Society of Philadelphia Minutes and Accounts.

Nonetheless, membership was not entirely limited to the elite. An examination of the members of the Sons of St. George provides some insights into the breakdown of membership in the early societies. The Society of the Sons of St. George was established in 1772; slightly more than half of its initial membership of eighty-five can be found in the provincial tax lists for either 1774 or 1769. That information, combined with references in the society’s minutes, shows that approximately one-third of all the members engaged in occupations associated with the “better sort” (doctors, merchants, clergy, governors, and military officers). If we add to these those with no profession listed but who were taxed more than fifty pounds, we find that at least 40 percent of all the founding members and at least 60 percent of those for whom some sort of information is readily available belonged to the upper tiers of the social strata. Unsurprisingly, almost all of the society’s officers came from this group.25

The remaining members came from various positions of lower rank, including at least a few shopkeepers and artisans who might be classified as belonging to the “middling sort.” Of the members included in the tax records, approximately one in five were assessed as owing no taxes and, thus, might have come from further down the social ladder. In addition to an English heritage and the approval of the society’s membership, joining the Sons of St. George required an initial payment of thirty shillings and yearly dues amounting to ten shillings as long as one retained membership. Thus, becoming a member required at least two pounds for the first year, plus additional money for either social expenditures on dinner and drinks with the other members before and after the quarterly meetings or the fines levied for nonattendance at those meetings. In all it might amount to 5 percent or more of a Philadelphia laborer’s yearly income, a nontrivial burden for a cash-strapped family. The monetary burden of joining the St. Andrew’s Society was roughly equivalent. It seems likely, then, that the membership of these early societies was dominated by the social elite but, nonetheless, stretched down into the ranks of those shopkeepers and artisans who had the wherewithal to make social and charitable contributions. Philadelphians of the “lower sort” were much more

likely to be petitioners of the societies than members.  

Just as they were less strict in regards to their members’ ethnic heritage, the later societies imposed a lighter financial burden on their members. The Hibernian Society required an initial payment of $2 and annual dues amounting to $1.50; joining their ranks would have required between 1 and 2 percent of an average laborer’s yearly wages in 1795. The Welsh Society initially imposed comparable fees. Neither of these societies imposed fines for nonattendance at the quarterly meetings; the minutes of the Welsh Society show that a considerable majority of the members only took part in the formal meetings once a year, if at all. Unsurprisingly, these later societies had substantially larger memberships. From the 12 men present at its inceptions, the Hibernian Society ballooned to include more than 200 members before its first anniversary; the Welsh Society would reach 110 members, almost double its initial size, in its first year. However, while these societies may have included a broader swath of the populace in their membership, they were unquestionably managed by the elite who ran the meetings and made the majority of the decisions regarding benevolence.

Finally, with regard to restrictions on membership, it almost goes without saying, and certainly went without explicit written declaration, that whether the society was composed of Englishmen, Scotsmen, Welshmen, or Irishmen, all were composed of men. If any women petitioned for membership in the early years of these societies, it was not recorded.

The top-heavy nature of these societies’ social make-up and organization is in large part a product of their intended function. Unlike other friendly societies formed around artisan guilds or by associations of craftsmen, these organizations were not intended to serve as safety nets for their members. Benevolence, not insurance, was the objective, and the

\[\text{26} \quad \text{Estimates of a laborer's wages for 1772 and 1795 come from the appendix of Billy G. Smith, ed., } Life \text{ in Early Philadelphia: Documents from the Revolutionary and Early National Periods (University Park, PA, 1995), 279. My breakdown of the "sorts" into lower, middling, and better follows Smith in "Philadelphia: The Athens of America," in Life in Early Philadelphia, 7–9.}\]

\[\text{27} \quad \text{Unfortunately, the minutes of the Hibernian Society between 1790 and 1813 cannot be found, making it difficult to track the membership of the society beyond its earliest records. Campbell, History of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, 149–79.}\]

\[\text{28} \quad \text{For a gendered view of public and semipublic poor relief in colonial Philadelphia, see Karin Wulf, "Gender and the Political Economy of Poor Relief in Colonial Philadelphia," in Down and Out in Early America, 163–89.}\]
members generally did not anticipate ever becoming petitioners themselves.

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Having examined the origin, purpose, and composition of these societies, we can now explore how they functioned in fulfilling their stated goals of relieving the immigrant poor and, in particular, where they placed themselves in relation to the increasingly institutionalized system of public poor relief in Philadelphia. In no sense were these benevolent societies providing alternatives to public assistance; they were very clear on this point in defining to whom and how they intended to provide relief. The St. Andrew’s Society, in justifying its existence, explained that private societies like itself were meant to serve purposes “which either had not been, or could not be so well provided for by the publick Acts of a Community” and that the membership had frequently encountered “People here in distress, more especially Travelers and transient Persons who are not entitled to the Publick Charity of the Place.” The societies existed to aid those people whom the public institutions either would not or could not assist; they did not intend to set up an entire substitute system of poor relief limited to their countrymen. The rules of the Society of the Sons of St. George explicitly limited its charity to those “not entitled to received Relief from the Overseers of the Poor of this city,” though in time the inadequacies of public relief would lead the membership to violate this restriction.29

Nevertheless, the aid of these benevolent societies seems to have been greatly preferred to that offered by the institutions of public relief. The societies may well have been the first place turned to by newly arrived immigrants who had yet to establish any networks of friendship or family in Philadelphia. The Almshouse, several scholars have noted, was generally the last resort. Unsurprisingly, then, it was not unusual for the societies to find themselves trying to steer reluctant petitioners toward public assistance. Jane Shepard, a poor woman of Scottish descent, managed to receive small sums twice from the St. Andrew’s Society before it finally demanded that in the future she seek help from the Almshouse. Barbara Grant, an elderly woman in “necessitous circumstances” was granted

29 Minutes, Nov. 30, 1751, St. Andrew’s Society of Philadelphia Minutes and Accounts; Rule 7 of the First Constitution, Society of the Sons of St. George Records.
steadily decreasing sums of money in response to four separate petitions made over the course of more than a year. Upon her fifth request, the society gave her a token amount and informed her that she had become “a great Burthen” and “that she ought apply to the Overseers of the Poor for publick Charity of the City.” Six months later she returned to the society, which once again told her to go to the Overseers of the Poor.30

Though the societies did not intend to replace the Almshouse, they were at times willing to work with the system of public relief in order to achieve a better outcome for one of their countrymen. One of the earliest petitioners of the Sons of St. George was Mary Ball, who sought assistance for herself and her family. Though she had been born in England, the society determined that she was eligible for public assistance and, therefore, that it could not provide her with any funds. Nonetheless, the society “promised to speak to the Overseers of the Poor” on Ball’s behalf. Accordingly, the records of the Almshouse show that “several Gentlemen of the St. George’s Society” met with two of the Overseers and secured a small out-relief payment for the family. This outcome is the more remarkable in that, at this time, funding for any sort of public relief outside of the Bettering House had been officially eliminated; it was only the influence of the society that spared the Ball family from confinement within that institution. Furthermore, the society later determined that the pension provided by the Overseers was insufficient to meet the family’s needs; when another round of appeals by the membership proved ineffective, the society decided to supplement the payments of the city with a small weekly allowance from its own funds.31

This preference of private over public relief is not surprising given the stifling conditions of the Bettering House and the popular aversion to it that historians have found among the poor. Though some of the ethnic societies tried to place moral restrictions on their benevolence, none of them could exert the level of control over the lives of their petitioners that


31 Minutes, July 23 and Oct. 23, 1772, and Jan. 23 and July 23, 1773, Society of the Sons of St. George Records; Daily Occurrence Docket, Aug. 10, 1772, Records of the Guardians of the Poor. The name listed here is Sarah Ball, though the timing, the number of family members, and the intervention of the society on her behalf show that it is the same family. One possible explanation for the discrepancy may be that Sarah was Mary’s mother or mother-in-law and that the petitioners determined that Sarah’s age would make her more likely to win assistance from the Overseers.
the managers of the Bettering House held over their inmates. These differing levels of control are perhaps most apparent when one considers the indenture of children. Impoverished parents who entered the Almshouse with small children ran the risk of those children being sold as indentured servants by the managers, as happened to Margaret and Martha Edwards. These indentures could, and often did, take place without the consent of the children’s parents or family. Isabella Johnson was bound out in such a manner only later to be found and kidnapped by her mother. When the two were eventually apprehended, Isabella’s mother was jailed and the child herself returned to the Bettering House where, within a month, she was again bound out as a servant. Fear of this sort of enforced family separation is likely what drove many of Philadelphia’s poor to prefer any sort of private relief, or even immense deprivation, to confinement in the Almshouse.32

The ethnic societies, of course, had no authority to split families in this manner, even if they had desired to. Indenture appears in their records rather differently. Mary McIntire was a poor Scottish women who had been widowed with five children; in 1751 and ’52 she received money from the St. Andrew’s Society on three occasions and lost one of her children (probably to smallpox). Upon her third request for assistance, the society, in addition to providing the family with relief, recommended that she consider binding out some of her children. Had she been willing, it is likely the society would have helped them find a good home; later in 1752 the society agreed to pay five pounds to secure a good apprenticeship for another Scottish child. The Welsh Society also oversaw the indenture of impoverished children in its early years, but it seems from its records that it only bound out orphans that had come under the care of the society’s Orphan Committee and then only as apprentices to craftsmen and artisans, rather than as mere laborers or servants.33

Faced with the inadequacies of existing poor relief institutions, the societies provided three types of poor relief that the public system either did not or could not offer. These were: relief for immigrants, pensions,


33 Minutes, Oct. 24, 1751, Jan. 29 and Nov. 30, 1752, St. Andrew's Society of Philadelphia Minutes and Accounts; Minutes, Mar. 1, 1806, June 5 and Dec. 4, 1809, Records of the Welsh Society of Philadelphia.
Relief for newly arrived immigrants was the most obvious specialty of the ethnic societies, and all four were deeply concerned with aiding those who had only recently set foot in America. The later societies were especially proactive in this regard, sending emissaries to meet immigrants at the docks to make certain they had not been abused on the voyage and to see to it that they were prepared to make a new home in Philadelphia. In cases of sickness or other disability, the societies offered medical care, housing, legal advice, or whatever else might be required. The Sons of St. George relieved one James Taylor, a new arrival from England, of his most immediate distress by loaning him the price of his passage and thus sparing him the trial of spending his first years in America as an indentured servant.34

These immigrants were often ineligible for Philadelphia’s public poor relief. Officially, such aid was only available to those who had first established a residency in the city either by paying taxes for one to two years or by renting a suitably expensive dwelling. Ineligible vagrants and paupers could, and often were, “warned out” of the city—escorted to the city limits, told to go back to wherever they had come from, and threatened with punishment should they attempt to return. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Almshouse hosted very few immigrants fresh from the boats; most of the inmates were long-time residents of the city.35

Pensions—regular payments to poor individuals and families outside the Almshouse—were another form of assistance offered by the societies that the public institutions of poor relief subjected to increasingly greater restrictions after the creation of the Bettering House and all but eliminated between 1769 and 1775. Founded in the midst of this moratorium, the Society of the Sons of St. George made a habit of providing small but regular sums to needy petitioners to pay for their housing and/or sustenance. At least half a dozen different individuals and families received these sorts of pensions from the society between its founding and the Revolution, generally for three-month periods that were renewable if conditions had not improved for the petitioner. Thus Elizabeth Croxford, a poor widow in “great distress,” received five shillings per week between

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January and April of 1775, at which point, after a reevaluation of her circumstances, the society determined to extend her allowance for another quarter. Mary Dodge, another poor English woman, received weekly payments for at least nine months in 1774.\textsuperscript{36}

These societies did not limit these sorts of payments to distressed widows, but also used them to help working men and their families pay for necessities during particularly difficult seasons. When Arthur Hurry, a Scottish cooper, became too sick to carry on his trade, he sent word to the St. Andrew’s Society which granted him and his family ten shillings each week for six weeks or until he recovered. The bricklayer John Parker received the same weekly sum from the Sons of St. George when his business went sour in the winter of 1774. The Welsh Society paid for Lewis Miles, his wife, and all seven of their children to move to the Lazaretto when the family was struck by an unnamed disease in 1800 and continued to pay their expenses until the illness ran its course. Shelter, food, and medical attention were also available through the system of public relief, but often required confinement in the Bettering House with all the loss of liberties that entailed.\textsuperscript{37}

Furthermore, admittance to the Almshouse generally required that one be in a state of near complete destitution. Those with goods or property that they could sell were expected to sell it and live off the proceeds before they were put on the public dole. Consequently, while public relief could serve to keep the dependent poor from perishing in the streets, it was not intended or well equipped to help the working poor remain above the line of absolute dependency. John Gaven, a shoemaker, came to the Almshouse in January 1795, likely driven there by the costs of food and firewood and a lack of business. When it later discovered that Gaven still owned property in the city, the Almshouse immediately ejected him and demanded that he repay all the money spent on his care. When he proved unwilling or unable to do so, he was arrested and jailed. Because public relief required that applicants be truly destitute, individuals and families living on the edge of poverty often faced the grim alternatives of either living with inadequate food, clothing, and shelter or being forced to sell

\textsuperscript{36} Minutes, Sept. 5, 1751, St. Andrew’s Society of Philadelphia Minutes and Accounts; Minutes, Jan. 1 and Apr. 23, 1775, and July 23 and Oct. 24 1774, Society of the Sons of St. George Records. It appears that the pension for Mary Dodge was first granted at or before the society’s quarterly meeting in April, but the minutes of that meeting are missing.

\textsuperscript{37} Minutes, Jan. 24, 1774, Society of the Sons of St. George Records; Minutes, Dec. 1, 1800, Records of the Welsh Society of Philadelphia.
off what goods they did possess in exchange for public aid. Such circum-
stances pointed to the need for a different sort of assistance that served to
fend off impoverishment rather than to aid the already impoverished.38

The benevolent ethnic societies were dedicated to providing this sort of
preemptive poor relief in various ways. By providing small, steady payments
that supported or replaced the out-relief offered by public institutions, the
societies helped fill the gap between what struggling individuals and fam-
ilies could earn and what was required to pay for necessities. Consequently, these families were able to stay in their own homes and
businesses and remain off the streets and out of the Almshouse. Similarly,
by proactively seeking out new arrivals and making sure that they suc-
ceeded in finding a home and a living in Philadelphia, the societies, par-
ticularly the Hibernian and Welsh societies, reduced the number of
immigrants who suffered economic failure due to ignorance, disease, or
mistreatment. In at least three other ways, the ethnic societies worked to
prop up struggling members of the “lower sort” and keep them from slip-
ning over the edge into complete dependency.

First, on several occasions, the societies provided small loans to help
petitioners either start up new businesses or survive temporary downturns
in ones they were already running. Patrick Wilson and his family received
their income by operating a sawmill in Society Hill. When the mill fell
into disrepair in 1751, Wilson approached the St. Andrew’s Society for
assistance in getting it fixed. The society agreed to loan Wilson the
money to have the mill repaired; six months later the work had been com-
pleted and paid for and the Wilsons were again able to maintain their
livelihood. Joseph Bull, an immigrant from England, hoped to set up a
business as a weaver in Philadelphia but due to “necessitous
Circumstances” found himself unable to afford “a Loom and other
Implements necessary to set up his Trade.” He found assistance in acquir-
ing these items from the Sons of St. George. John Hewson, the afore-
mentioned “industrious Sober” calico printer, first came to the English
society while in the process of establishing his business and requested “the
Assistance of the Society in carrying on this Undertaking.” After deem-
ing his character acceptable, the society granted Hewson and his partner
a ten pound loan. Small loans such as these, generally made over a period
of about six months, helped Philadelphia’s immigrant craftsmen and artis-
sans establish and retain their livelihood through particularly difficult

38 Daily Occurrence Docket, May 18, 1796, Records of the Guardians of the Poor.
periods and thus kept them from sinking to the depths of true poverty from which they might not have been able to recover.39

In addition to helping immigrants establish their businesses in Philadelphia, the societies also assisted unsuccessful immigrants in moving on to greener pastures or in returning to their homelands. William Stephen Shey traveled to Philadelphia from London intending to set himself up as a silk weaver. When his business collapsed he desired to return to England, but was left almost entirely bereft of funds. When he brought his situation before the Society of the Sons of St. George in 1774, the society agreed not only to pay a lump sum toward his transport home but also to support him with regular payments of five shillings a week until he could make the trip. The stewards of the Welsh Society found immigrant Edward Price “destitute in every respect” in the streets of Philadelphia. They “accordingly took him under their protection” and, since he desired to seek better fortunes in the West Indies, “appointed a Committee to procure him passage.” After poor Mary Eaton of Glasgow was abandoned by her husband in 1750 and left to care for three young children on her own, the St. Andrew’s Society supported her with funds for housing and bread. When, some months later, Eaton discovered that her runaway husband “was living very well in South Carolina,” she determined to take her family there and “make him a visit.” The society enlisted friendly shipmasters to provide free passage to the family and paid off Eaton’s remaining debts in Philadelphia so that she and her family could move south. Numerous other examples exist of the societies’ paying to send poor petitioners to other colonies or back to Great Britain when there was reason to believe they would have better fortune there than in Philadelphia. Such activities helped limit the number of hopeless paupers on Philadelphia’s streets and helped place immigrants in situations where they were more likely to succeed, rather than leaving them trapped in permanent dependency. As with the small business loans the societies offered, this sort of preemptive poor relief was intended not just to support the poor but to provide them with a way of escaping, or avoiding, poverty altogether.40

39 Minutes, Nov. 30, 1751, Jan. 29 and June 6, 1752, St. Andrew’s Society of Philadelphia Minutes and Accounts; Minutes, Jan. 23, 1773, and July 23, 1774, Society of the Sons of St. George Records.
Finally, the societies provided professional services such as medical care and legal counsel to petitioners who might otherwise have been unable to afford them. The Welsh and Hibernian societies made these services official by electing qualified members to act as the physicians and lawyers of the society. These members were then effectively “on call” should the stewards encounter a countryman (or woman) in need of their advice or assistance. Though the earlier societies did not specifically elect members to act in such capacities, their membership rolls invariably contained individuals versed in medicine and law, and these members were often called upon to aid the poor petitioners of the society. Thus the distinguished Scottish physician Dr. Thomas Graeme, president of the St. Andrew’s Society, was called upon to cure Jane Mackinzie, a poor Scottish immigrant from Glasgow who came to the society to “humbly crave some relief of those Gentlemen of my Country” because of a “distemper in her mouth.” When Graeme, working with another physician from the society, was unable to find a cure for the ailment, the society paid to relocate Mackinzie to the countryside, where it hoped that she would fare better. The appointed physicians of the Welsh Society found Mary Pritchet in dire straits. Despite their best efforts, they came to conclude that she was “laboring under a consumption which afforded no hope of recovery.” Unable to cure her, the society nonetheless “extended such relief as afforded them to the consolation of knowing that her last moments were rendered in some measure comfortable.” Five years earlier, the Welsh Society had provided professional aid of a different sort to Mary Philips, a widow under their care. When she became involved in a legal dispute over withheld wages, the society decided that it was obligated to intervene on her behalf and appointed a committee to settle the matter for her. The Hibernian Society seems to have been particularly dedicated to securing justice in the courts for its charges. When the committee from the society met Irish immigrants at the docks, it not only inquired into their condition but also investigated the nature of their journey to confirm that they had received ample room, food, and water and that, in general, the laws regulating passenger traffic to Philadelphia had been obeyed. If such was not the case, the committee was required to “take all legal and proper measures for the prosecution and punishment of the offenders,” including summoning the society’s own legal counsel and, if necessary, hiring outside lawyers to assist them.41

41 Minutes, Jan. 10, Mar. 1, and May 22, 1750, St. Andrew’s Society of Philadelphia Minutes and
The immigrant “lower sort” often had little recourse when they suffered disease or were taken advantage of by unscrupulous individuals. Without the money to hire qualified medical or legal professionals or a familiarity with the workings of the legal system, such misfortunes could easily push them over the edge into insolvency. By providing these services freely and by providing them outside of a confined institutional setting, the benevolent ethnic societies helped their petitioners to weather trials that might otherwise have broken them and ruined their chances for success in the New World.

The reasons the benevolent ethnic societies conducted poor relief differently from Philadelphia’s public relief institutions are varied. One factor that unquestionably limited the sort of relief public institutions could offer was the greater population they served. Because the societies did not always record acts of benevolence carried out between their quarterly meetings, it is difficult to gauge precisely how many lives they touched each year, but even under the most generous assumptions, in their busiest years they never dealt with as many needy petitioners as did the Almshouse. More expansive forms of assistance would only have exacerbated the fiscal distress the public institutions experienced more or less constantly from midcentury on.42

Extending the sort of preemptive poor relief conducted by the ethnic societies to the city at large may simply have been beyond the economic means of the public system, but there is some reason to believe that differences also existed in how the societies and the public institutions viewed the poor they were assisting. The inmates of the Bettering House were expected to labor during their residence. Plying their trades, picking oakum, washing laundry or performing other tasks, the poor worked not only to lessen the cost of their upkeep but to affect a transformation in their character. In drafting the ordinances that would regulate the Bettering House in 1769, the managers declared that “All Persons admitted who are capable of working, shall be employed, as well to inure them to Labor as to contribute to their support.” Speaking before the General Assembly in 1768, the managers’ representatives lauded the legal statute

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42 In most of the societies, an elected committee of stewards was empowered to provide a limited amount of relief to needy immigrants between quarterly meetings without waiting for permission from the society at large.
that had created the Bettering House for the ways in which it would “pro-
mote Industry and Frugality amongst all the Poor,” in part by “compelling
the idle and slothful to perform such Labor as might be best adapted to
to their Circumstances.” The managers firmly believed that the poor did not
merely need to be supported but also deeply altered, and at times they
thought rather highly of their ability to perform such alterations. In 1770
they proudly announced that the poor who came into the Bettering
House as “People of dissolute Manners,” “Nuisances to the Community,”
or otherwise victims of disease and vice, emerged again “so remarkably
altered, as to become Subjects of Surprise to many of the Inhabitants who
had known them in their former Conditions.”43

A central purpose of public poor relief was to transform the “idle and
slothful” into the industrious and frugal. Those who had yet to experience
this alteration or, worse still, resisted the labor and regulation meant to
achieve it, often provoked considerable resentment and contempt from
their would-be reformers. Even a cursory reading of the Daily Occurrence
Docket of the Almshouse reveals that the recorder viewed many of the
inmates with extreme derision. A few selections are illustrative:

**AUGUST 2, 1790:**
Admitted . . . Thomas Oakley—one of the most notorious Scoundrels that
We have been frequently plagued with off and on, for upwards of twenty
years, a common public Nuisance. He was whipped at a post in this Yard
nearly about that time ago . . . for his Insolent and Disorderly Conduct,
and ever since hath been a frequent Customer and Inhabitant of the Goal
Workhouse and this Place, is now returned as Ragged, Lousey and
Diseased as Ever.

**NOVEMBER 8, 1793:**
Eloped . . . Musgrove Harry, a drunken, idle disorderly fellow . . . good rid-
dance of bad Rubbish.

**NOVEMBER 28, 1793:**
Discharged . . . Abraham Cowley. The Noted drunken one leg’d

43 Ordinances Rules and Bye Laws for the Almshouse and House of Employment, Alms House
Managers minutes of May 26, 1788, Records of the Guardians of the Poor (emphasis added). On
the address to the assembly see Pennsylvania Archives, 8th ser., 7:6148. The claims of successful trans-
formations appeared as part of a general report on the status of the institution in the Pennsylvania
Gazette, Jan. 25, 1770. This report also appeared in the Alms House Managers minutes, Jan. 22,
1770.
Shoemaker—with his more Notorious Drunken, disorderly worthless Wife and their Child.

**JULY 2, 1796:**

Admitted . . . Matthew Richards, a noted drunken worthless, preaching Nuisance, he is now (as common) shamefully drunk and justly worthy of a commitment to a place of punishment, rather than to be admitted into an Alms-house, that he hath been a pest to, and common disturber of, for many years past.

While not all entries were quite so harsh, these are hardly exceptional, and terms such as “worthless,” “unworthy,” “lazy,” “disorderly,” and “notorious” recur in entry after entry, year after year; much more rarely does one find a kind word toward even the most pathetic of inmates. Similar pejoratives are difficult to find among the records of the ethnic societies, even with regard to petitioners who were rejected: when the St. Andrew’s Society declared Mary Agnew “of an undeserving Character” it was being atypically harsh.44

This image of the managers of public poor relief as judgmental, moralistic, and distrustful of the poor conforms with portrayals of them found in the works of Gary Nash, John Alexander, Billy Smith, Seth Rockman, and other historians who have deeply studied the poor and poor relief in the late eighteenth century. With words that might have been pulled from the Daily Occurrences Docket, Rockman has claimed that the moral reformers of public assistance viewed the recipient of that relief as “inherently lazy, sexually immoral, and a parasite upon hardworking taxpayers.” Gary Nash’s statement that there was a “growing tendency to regard the needy as flawed members of society who needed to be reformed rather than relieved” reflects a wide historiographical consensus. Such beliefs led to a harsh, restricted, institutional form of public relief that was primarily dedicated to forcing the “idle” poor to become moral and industrious and to rescuing those at the extremes of destitution from death. This outlook spared little interest, and less money, for the forms of preemptive poor relief practiced by the benevolent ethnic societies.45

How, then, did the ethnic societies avoid this same mentality? This article tentatively suggests two answers. Alexander asserts that “the managers [of the Bettering House] typically dealt with the very bottom seg-

44 Minutes, Dec. 18, 1751, St. Andrew’s Society of Philadelphia Minutes and Accounts.
ment of those receiving public poor relief,” and that this contributed to their negative view of the poor generally. The records of the Almshouse do show that many of the poor it served were prostitutes, criminals, drunkards, unwed mothers, and other classes of the impoverished who would almost certainly have failed the character tests of ethnic societies and, for that reason, rarely applied to them for help. The societies’ ability to be selective in who they relieved meant that they generally saw the impoverished only in their best light. The petitioners who approached the Scottish and British societies were generally those who believed themselves “deserving” enough to warrant such benevolence and doubtless made every effort to put the best possible face on the circumstances that brought them to penury. The freshly arrived immigrants met by the Irish and Welsh societies hardly had time to exhibit moral failings before the societies’ stewards approached them. None of these indigent were committed to the societies’ care against their will, as was the case with various individuals in the Almshouse. Thus, the first answer is that the societies were better able to view the poor as upstanding because they tended to see only the upstanding poor.

The second answer is suggested by certain key phrases found in the societies’ records and founding documents. The Sons of St. George justified their ethnically limited benevolence on the grounds that their countrymen were their “peculiar care”; likewise the St. Andrew’s Society’s foremost apology for granting aid only to Scotsmen was that they, the members of the society, were Scotsmen. Even the Hibernian Society, which opened its doors to members of any nationality, began as a society of Irishmen for Irishmen. Most directly, the Welsh Society wrote of a “special Fellowship with the Descendants of our Ancestors” that created a “stronger obligation” to care for them. The societies were founded on the premise that immigrants from the same land, even if strangers separated by a generation or more, had a unique connection with one another. Both in their charitable and in their fraternal functions the societies constantly celebrated this special link that bound the members both to one another and to their petitioners. Thus, the general trend in eighteenth-century society toward a harsher, more judgmental, more restricted view of the poor, so aptly chronicled in the historiography, was retarded in individuals and

46 Alexander, Render Them Submissive, 93.
organizations that recognized that they held some connection with the poor beyond simply providing them with relief. In the case of these societies, this other connection was formed by the bonds of a shared ethnic heritage and strengthened by a shared identity as immigrants to America.

Other works have found a similar divergence from the general social trend. Monique Bourque found that most of the counties around Philadelphia moved toward more institutionalized forms of poor relief in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, just as Philadelphia itself had done earlier. Like the reformers of Philadelphia, those drafting regulations for these county almshouses increasingly stressed the importance of “reforming” the idle and undeserving poor. Bourque asserts that, for various reasons, there was a “dissociation between poor relief policy . . . and actual practice on the local level.” She notes that “officials used their discretion to temper regulations, thereby disclosing that they clung to more humane aspects of traditional relief while adjusting to the new age of institutions.” This leniency may be attributable, Bourque argues, to the fact that the interactions between the recipients and administrators of poor relief in the rural counties were “more intimate than relief transactions in larger urban institutions” due to the tighter communal and commercial bonds in rural communities and the fact that the providers of poor relief often knew the applicants. Consequently, those providers “felt a strong sense of obligation” to their charges. Here, then, the overseers of public relief were more likely to be connected to their charges through bonds of local commerce, neighborhood acquaintance, or even friendship. They were, as a result, slower to embrace the regulated and restricted forms of institutional poor relief that had taken root earlier in Philadelphia.48

Simone Newman explored the lot of Philadelphia’s poor by examining death and burial in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Philadelphia through the burial records of the Reverend Nicholas Collins, a rector at Gloria Dei. Newman acknowledges that Collins lived in a city that was increasingly embracing the notion, made manifest in the Bettering House, that “the poor were themselves to blame for their condition.” Yet Newman found that Collins, through his connections with the poor at the times of their demise, managed to avoid this common perception. His

48 Monique Bourque, “Poor Relief ‘Without Violating the Rights of Humanity’: Almshouse Administration in the Philadelphia Region, 1790–1860,” in Down and Out in Early America, 190, 196.
close association and identity with the impoverished allowed him to recognize “that the poor he lived among and buried had precious little control over their circumstances.” The same motivating realization can be found in the ethnic societies when they recognized the particular abuses and disappointments to which immigrants were subject. Both for Collins and the ethnic societies, the crucial revelation was that distress among the poor was often the result of forces beyond their control and not necessarily the fruit of apathy and debauchery.⁴⁹

A final example comes from John K. Alexander, who records that in the 1760s the Overseers of the Poor and the managers of the newly constructed Bettering House engaged in a dispute over the future of public relief, particularly over whether to continue out-relief for the “deserving poor.” Where the new managers meant to force all relief recipients into the “reforming” atmosphere of the Bettering House, the overseers believed that certain individuals on the city’s dole were morally sound enough to be left alone and did not need or deserve to be confined in exchange for assistance. The particular connection between the overseers and the poor, which the managers lacked, was one of economic proximity. Alexander writes that “the managers lived in a world where the immediate horrors of poverty did not often touch them in a direct, personal way. . . . On the other hand, the overseers . . . lived in a world where poverty was more likely to touch them or their acquaintances personally.” Like Nicholas Collins, the overseers were better able than most to see the reality of poverty through the eyes of the poor.⁵⁰

In each of these examples, individuals with particular connections to the impoverished, whether by local acquaintance, personal association, or economic proximity, developed the ability to see the poor as individuals like themselves. This association helped them to avoid the belief, increasingly common among the elite, that poverty could be blamed on those who suffered from it and that moral rectitude and penury were mutually exclusive. In the benevolent societies it was a shared immigrant identity and a shared ethnic heritage, celebrated over and over again in fraternal meals and laudatory toasts as well as in the care of the unfortunate, that performed this function.

Ethnic benevolence proved to be both exclusive and expansive, limit-

⁵⁰ Alexander, Render Them Submissive, 93.
ing the breadth of charity while deepening it. The benevolence offered by these four societies points to the significance of personal relationships beyond those of provider-petitioner—to the importance of a “special Fellowship”—in shaping both the motives for and the methods of poor relief in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia.

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