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Ruth Wallis Herndon and Amilcar E. Challú

Mapping the Boston Poor: Inmates of the Boston Almshouse, 1795–1801

This article examines postrevolutionary Boston through evidence about its poorest inhabitants, those admitted to the town's almshouse from 1795 to 1801. Charts and maps constructed from Boston Almshouse records and geographical data about Boston for these years reveal the characteristics of the Almshouse inmates, as well as their residential location before entering the facility and their mobility after entering it a first time. This study is part of a broader project that applies Geographical Information Systems (GIS) to analyze and visualize patterns evinced by the inmates of the Boston Almshouse during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although the conclusions apply to a short time period and a particular subset of the population, they should elicit further research about how marginalized groups navigated the city of Boston, as well as other eighteenth-century cities.

Our findings are threefold. First, geographical differences are evident in how people used the Almshouse. A much higher percentage of Almshouse inmates were from Boston's densely populated North End than from more pastoral areas or sections with lower population densities. Second, people clustered in particular ways. The immigrants who comprised a large part of the Almshouse population tended to come from districts close to commercial and shipping activities, whereas women and families tended to come from the less urban outskirts of the town. Third, Almshouse inmates were highly mobile. Typical recurrent inmates (those who used the Almshouse more than once) were likely to have changed

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Amilcar E. Challú is Assistant Professor of History, Bowling Green State University. He is the author of "'Their Bellies Must Be So Big': Grain Hoarders and the Emergence of the Political Economy in Late Colonial Mexico," in Michael Jonathan Rotenberg-Schwartz (ed.), *Global Economies, Cultural Currencies of the Eighteenth Century* (Brooklyn, 2010), 97–120; co-editor, with Richard Salvatore and John Coatsworth, of *Living Standards in Latin American History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

their ward of residence during the six-year window of our study. Residential mobility created an environment in constant flux that defies static notions about the pre-industrial city.

This article engages in a dialogue with a broad literature about early America, urban history, welfare policies, and inequality, addressing the diverse and creative strategies used by poor city dwellers to cope with adversity—moving to and from the city, relying on social networks (kinship, neighborhoods, church membership, etc.), and taking advantage of poor-relief institutions.

The almshouse was the cornerstone of poor relief in the early American city. Boston constructed its first one in the 1660s, but by the revolutionary era far larger and more populated almshouses had been founded in Philadelphia, New York, and other larger towns. Other institutions—orphans, for example—followed during the late 1700s and early 1800s. By establishing almshouses and orphanages, Americans were following a long-standing European tradition. Although the systems of poor relief widely practiced in early America depended on sending poor people to their “home towns,” and keeping them there for support, many of those poor people continued to be mobile.¹

Our research suggests that the inmates of the Boston Almshouse, who were among the poorest inhabitants of the city, were not pinned in place by their poverty. Scholars have long recognized that poor people were attracted by the early American city but not necessarily that they continued to be mobile after they arrived

1 Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York, 1996; orig. pub. 1986), 14–16, 107–113; Herndon, “Poor Women and the Boston Almshouse in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, XXXII (2012), 349–381; John E. Murray, *The Charleston Orphan House: Children’s Lives in the First Public Orphanage in America* (Chicago, 2013), 2–3, 11–12. Nicholas Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna* (Baltimore, 2005), argues that sixteenth-century orphanages in these cities established a pattern for subsequent institutions throughout Europe. For the early modern period, see also Thomas Max Safley, *Children of the Laboring Poor: Expectations and Experience among the Orphans of Early Modern Augsburg* (Boston, 2005); Steven King, *Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, U.K., 2000). Three studies of poor relief by Herndon, Karin Wulf, and Monique Bourque in Billy G. Smith (ed.), *Down and Out in Early America* (University Park, 2004) show that town magistrates expected poor residents to stay in place in order to receive tax relief or basic necessities supplied by local caretakers (135–212). The system of poor-relief administration that the American colonies inherited from Britain was based on ensuring that poor people remained in their “proper” geographical place. However, local authorities often had to remove poor people to their town of origin. See Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans: Living on the Margin in Early New England* (Philadelphia, 2001).

there. Most studies of urban inequality have also relied on tax records, which are biased toward the wealthier, more visible, and geographically more stable portion of the population. By using the almshouse admission records (often of immigrants, women, and recurrent users), our study offers a new way to understand mobility and social differentiation in the early modern city.²

THE POOR AND THE CITY The study of residential differentiation and residential mobility that the urban history of the 1960s initiated has been revitalized by such computerized tools of data analysis and visualization as GIS. Originally driven by concerns with capitalist and industrial transformation of the urban space, scholars more recently have placed emphasis on how clustering and differentiation contributed to the formation of identities, social networks, and strategies of coping.³

Investigations of residential patterns tend to characterize differentiation along a continuum of integration and segregation in which the latter is primarily a phenomenon of the industrial and capitalist city. Before industrialization, classes and occupational groups coexisted in the same blocks and sometimes the same houses. The cases of Britain and the Netherlands, the countries studied most consistently through the use of comparable datasets, show what may be called “around the corner” segregation—wealthy inhabitants living in prime streets near the hubs of social, political, and commercial life, alternating with lower-status dwell-

2 Carl Bridenbaugh described the influx of the poor to early American cities in *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625–1742* (New York, 1938), 78–84, 232–238, 391–398; *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743–1776* (New York, 1955), 122–128. See also Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979). Studies of urban-based poor-relief institutions underscore the link between urban life and poverty. See, for example, Robert E. Cray, Jr., *Poverty and Poor Relief in New York City and Its Rural Environs, 1700–1830* (Philadelphia, 1988); Seth Rockman (ed.), *Welfare Reform in the Early Republic: A Brief History with Documents* (New York, 2003).

3 For a good overview of the recent literature and the research opportunities presented by technology, see Donald A. DeBats and Mark Lethbridge, “GIS and the City: Nineteenth-Century Residential Patterns,” *Historical Geography*, XXXIII (2005), 78–98. For a good discussion of the potential influence of GIS technology on historical inquiry, see Anne Kelly Knowles and Amy Hillier (eds.), *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial Data, and GIS Are Changing Historical Scholarship* (Redlands, 2008); David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor M. Harris (eds.), *The Spatial Humanities: GIS and the Future of Humanities Scholarship* (Bloomington, 2010). See also “Railways, Populations, and Geographical Information Systems,” a special issue of *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XLII (2011), 1–157.

ers in back alleys or narrower streets. French cities apparently had more differentiation between neighborhoods, though their levels of inequality were not as pronounced as they were to become later in the nineteenth century.⁴

Studies of early American cities have discovered a higher degree of differentiation than was found in Europe. In her study of land values and residential patterns in 1790 Philadelphia, Schweitzer disagreed with interpretations that emphasized integration, concluding that the city inhabitants had the “impulse to form distinct districts by class, occupation, sex and race.” Sivitz and Smith’s impressive ongoing project to create a geospatial database of revolutionary Philadelphia is showing significant patterns of class differentiation or, at least, occupational specialization. Kulikoff’s work on inequality in Boston has similarly shown that wealth was a major differentiating factor in residential clustering by ward. Meyer’s work on land use in Boston also shows that the “spatial core of late-eighteenth-century Boston has a distinctly higher residential status than the outlying areas.”⁵

In all of these cases, however, the general pattern of clustering is complicated by evidence that people of different groups lived in close proximity to each other, thus defying clear delimitations. Meyer notes, for instance, the mingling of rich and poor residents in the same neighborhoods and buildings, although the rich had access to the main streets and the lower floors whereas the poor had

4 Colin G. Pooley, “Residential differentiation in Victorian Cities: A Reassessment,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, IX (1984), 131–144; James E. Vance, Jr., “Land Assignment in the Precapitalist, Capitalist, and Postcapitalist City,” *Economic Geography*, XLVII (1971), 101–120. For an excellent analysis of the Netherlands and a review of recent findings in early modern Europe, see Clé Lesger and Marco H. D. Van Leeuwen, “Residential Segregation from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century: Evidence from the Netherlands,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XLII (2012), 333–369. Philip Benedict, “French Cities from the Sixteenth Century to the Revolution: An Overview,” in *idem*, *Cities and Social Change in Early Modern France* (London, 1989), 11.

5 Mary M. Schweitzer, “The Spatial Organization of Federalist Philadelphia, 1790,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXIV (1993), 31–57; Paul Sivitz and Smith, “Philadelphia and Its People in Maps: The 1790s,” in *The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, Rutgers University, 2012, available at <http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/philadelphia-and-its-people-in-maps-the-1790s>; *idem*, “Mapping America’s First City: Life in Early Philadelphia,” paper presented at the 18th Annual Omohundro Conference, The Huntington Library, San Marcos, Calif., June 15, 2012; Allan Kulikoff, “The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXVIII (1971), 396–399; William B. Meyer, “A City (Only Partly) on a Hill: Terrain and Land Use in Pre-Twentieth Century Boston,” in Anthony N. Penna and Conrad Edick Wright (eds.), *Remaking Boston: An Environmental History of the City and Its Surroundings* (Pittsburgh, 2009), 127–147, quotation on 129.

access only to the back alleys and the upper reaches. Cases from other small mercantile and industrializing cities in the nineteenth century indicate a limited degree of differentiation in residential patterns and strong geographical dispersion in social behavior. A binary of integration and segregation clashes with a more complex reality.⁶

The poor often lived in affordable areas close to their sources of employment and their social relations. Changes in the composition of the family, employment, income, and the cost of housing often drove them to change residence within short periods of time. Carr traced the “extensive intramobility” of the Boston residents who appear in the tax–assessment records (*Taking Books*) from 1780 to 1799. She found that “laborers exhibited the lowest rate of persistence in any given ward and the highest rate of intramobility.” But Carr’s impressive work did not track those residents who did not appear in the *Taking Books*, including those in the Almshouse. Thernstrom and Knights showed that in the 1830s, only one-third of Boston’s households persisted in directory listings for more than five years; a more refined measure shows that one-third of Boston households later in the century changed address from one year to the next. Thernstrom and Knights concluded that the high mobility of Boston inhabitants called for a re-examination of the idea that the city was segregated. Poor people were not trapped in slum areas; they moved and constantly redefined residential patterns. Studies of nineteenth-century Amsterdam, Montreal, and Venice further confirm the existence of a highly mobile population of poor people seeking other houses or apartments in the city as a coping strategy that depended on broader social linkages.⁷

6 Meyer, “City,” 129; DeBats and Lethbridge, “GIS and the City,” 78–98; John Swauger, “Pittsburgh’s Residential Pattern in 1815,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, LXVIII (1978), 265–277.

7 For a good analysis of decisions to live near work and social relations, see Pooley and Jean Turnbull, *Migration and Mobility in Britain since the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1998). See Jacqueline Barbara Carr, *After the Siege: A Social History of Boston, 1775–1800* (Boston, 2005), 71, for a unique study that tracks householders’ movements systematically from ward to ward within the city in the eighteenth century. Peter R. Knights, “Population Turnover, Persistence, and Residential Mobility in Boston, 1830–1860,” in Stephan Thernstrom and Richard Sennett (eds.), *Nineteenth-Century Cities: Essays in the New Urban History* (New Haven, 1969), 267–271; Thernstrom and Knights, “Men in Motion: Some Data and Speculations about Urban Population Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, I (1970), 23, 32; Jan Kok, Kees Mandemakers, and Henk Wals, “City Nomads: Changing Residence as a Coping Strategy, Amsterdam, 1890–1940,” *Social Science History*, XXIX (2005),

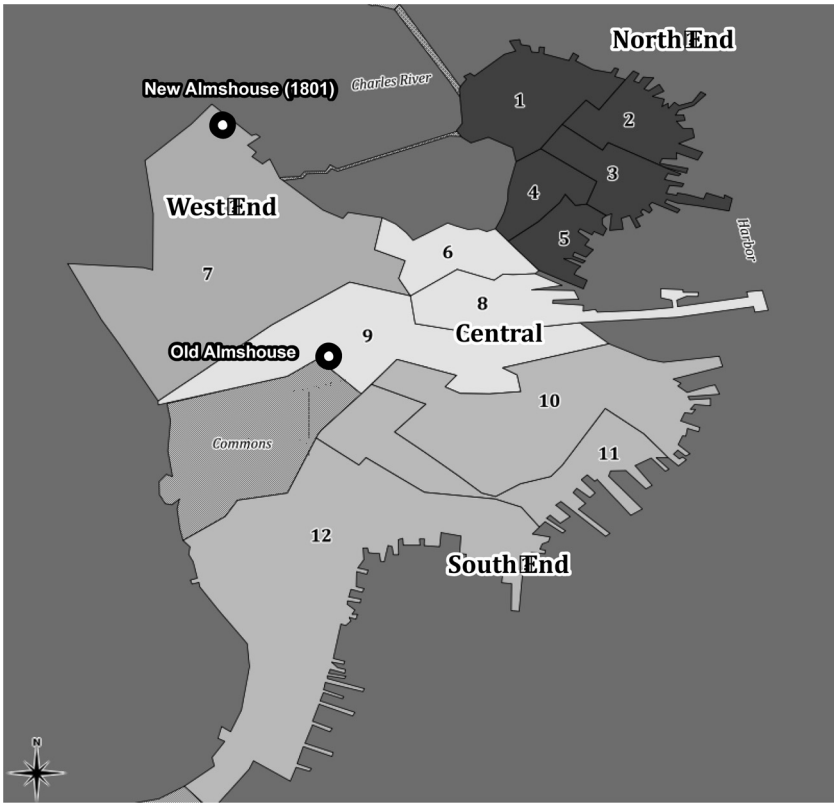
Boston at the turn of the nineteenth century is an ideal place to investigate how the poor—more specifically, almshouse users—navigated a mercantile, preindustrial city. Boston emerged from the revolutionary period as a city in fast transformation. It lost its distinction as the hub of the British Atlantic, but it re-adapted quickly to the changing political economy of postrevolutionary America. The city grew rapidly, incorporating new migrants not just from New England but from all corners of the world. As it grew in population, it grew in territory, expanding westward and southward on marshlands. It also grew in inequality. By the early nineteenth century, the transfer of the Almshouse to the outskirts signaled the appropriation of the area near the Commons for the Boston elite. This article explores how the poorest residents adapted and became part of this process of redefining the geography of the city.⁸

POSTREVOLUTIONARY BOSTON AND THE ALMSHOUSE Our study period of 1795 to 1801 encompasses the final years of the old Almshouse that stood in the geographical center of the city, adjacent to Boston Common (see Figure 1). Public concern about the condition and care of the inmates had reached an all-time high. In 1801, the overcrowded facility was closed in favor of a larger Almshouse at Barton's Point in the West End. The community's opening of a new Almshouse illustrates the city's burgeoning social and economic situation at the turn of the nineteenth century. From 1775 to 1800, the annual rate of Boston's population growth was close to 1.8 percent. Between 1790 and 1800, the population swelled by 40 percent, from 18,000 to 25,000. In the 1790s, Boston was "a town of traders, shopkeepers, and those engaged in commerce." It had also recovered its importance as a shipbuilding center with important oceanic trade connections. Immigrants from all over the world and country dwellers from all over New England poured into Boston, even as the port city experienced economic ups and downs prompted by shifting trade pat-

15–43; Jason A. Gilliland, "Modeling Residential Mobility in Montreal, 1860–1900," *Historical Methods*, XXXI (1998), 27–42; Renzo Derosas, "Residential Mobility in Venice, 1850–1869," *Annales de démographie historique*, IV (1999), 35–61.

8 Carr, *After the Siege*, 229–235, 43–87, 157, 82–83; Kulikoff, "Progress of Inequality," 381–384; Meyer, "City," 134–135.

Fig. 1 Basemap

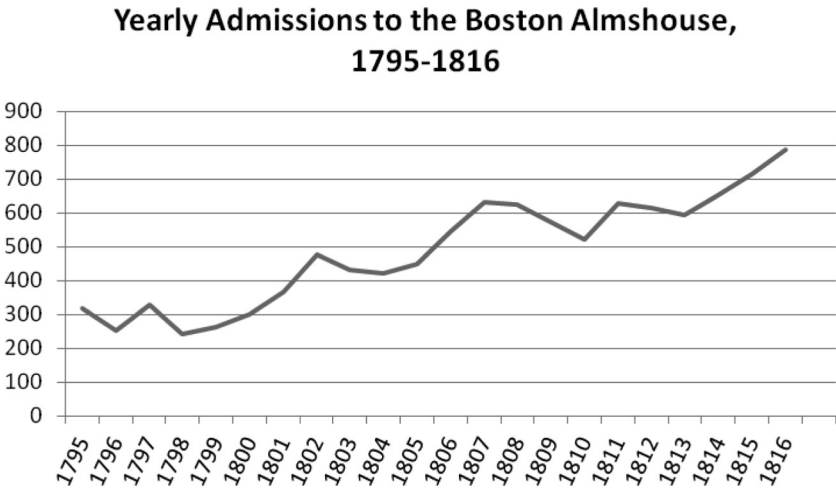


terns with the Atlantic and Pacific worlds during the years following the American Revolution.⁹

The Almshouse worked at full capacity, admitting 300 cases each year from late 1795 to 1801. In total, 1,322 individuals passed through the Almshouse (discounting re-entries from the total)—5 percent of Boston’s population in 1800. Authorities worried about the destitute, urging taxpayers to fund a larger facility that

9 Population statistics come from Michael R. Haines, “Population of Cities with at Least 100,000 Population in 1990: 1790–1990,” in Susan B. Carter et al. (eds.), *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition* (New York, 2006), I, 110–118 (Series Aa856), and John J. McCusker, “Population of Cities—Boston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston: 1630–1790,” in *ibid.*, V, 655 (Series Eg64). Figures have been rounded to the nearest 100. Carr, *After the Siege*, 161–162; Oscar Handlin, *Boston’s Immigrants, 1790–1880: A Study in Acculturation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991; orig. pub. 1969), 3–5.

Fig. 2 Yearly Admissions



could accommodate the needy in better conditions. When the new Almshouse finally opened, it had double the capacity of the old Almshouse, and the inmate population expanded rapidly to fill it (see Figure 2).¹⁰

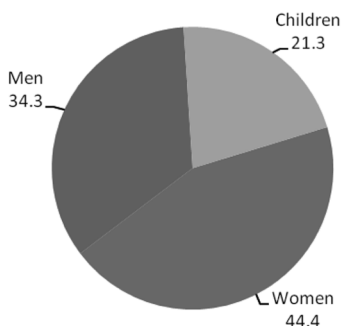
Sending individuals and families to the Almshouse was arguably the most important duty of the overseers of the poor. The annually elected twelve-member board of overseers comprised Boston's most prominent citizens. Each board member supervised the needy in one of the city's twelve wards; they had the additional responsibility of sending those in the worst circumstances to the Almshouse. Almshouse inmates included long-time inhabitants of a ward who had fallen on hard times and could no longer support themselves, relative newcomers whose resources had run out, and impoverished immigrants from Europe or the New England countryside.

The age-sex profile of the Almshouse population differed from Boston's overall population. According to the 1800 federal

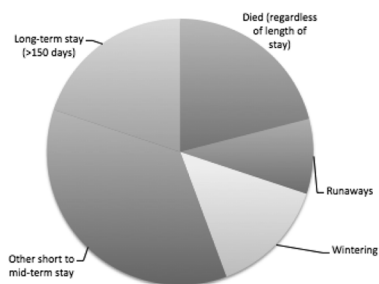
10 Carr, *After the Siege*, 110–111. Reports about the condition of the old almshouse and petitions for building a new one appear sporadically in Boston's eighteenth-century town-meeting records. See, for example, the report of the "Committee Appointed to Consider the State of the Almshouse," presented at the Boston Town Meeting of August 19, 1790, Boston Town Meeting Records 8:182–183, reproduced as *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston containing Boston Town Records, 1784 to 1786* (hereinafter *BTR*) (Boston, 1903), XXXI, 239–240.

Fig. 3 General Characteristics of the Almshouse Inmates

(A) Inmates by Age-Sex Group (August 1, 1796)



(B) Inmates by Type of Exit and Length of Stay (1795-1801)



census, Boston had 6,800 adult white males (29 percent of all whites), 7,900 adult white females (33 percent of all whites), 4,500 white male children, and 4,600 white female children (together, 38 percent of all whites). The census takers did not differentiate the 1,200 people of color by age or sex. The Almshouse population included a much larger proportion of women than men and a much smaller proportion of children than adults (see Figure 3, Panel A). On August 1, 1796, women were the largest sex–age group in the Almshouse, underscoring a pattern of female domination of the institution that lasted from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. But the Almshouse was a female space not just because women had numerical superiority: Women were the more visible inmates because they performed traditional women’s work to maintain the facilities. Women were also more likely than men to use the Almshouse as a family harbor during times of crisis, and more likely to maintain and build social connections while they were in the Almshouse.¹¹

The reasons for admission were varied and, in many cases, are now untraceable, but certain patterns in entries and exits permit a few preliminary speculations. The large number of inmates who died during their stay (see Figure 3) indicates that disease was a major factor, especially because Boston lacked a hospital during this

11 Census of 1800, “Return of the Whole Number of Persons within the Several Districts of the United States,” 8; Herndon, “Poor Women,” 366.

period. About one-fifth of the inmates died during their stay in the Almshouse.

The town deliberations indicate that some of Boston's leading citizens envisioned something of a disciplinary role for the Almshouse. As Boston grew, the more prosperous residents expressed increasing concern about the number and, particularly, the morality of the poor. At the time when the new almshouse was opening, town voters urged magistrates to be "exact and vigilant" about residents "whose characters are suspicious, whose morals are bad, who have no settled reputable means for a livelihood." Magistrates removed such people to their home towns through a legal process called "warning out." The fact that 9 percent of admissions resulted in runaways suggests resistance to the Almshouse's penitentiary (or disciplinary) function.¹²

Other indications, however, point to inmates entering the Almshouse voluntarily because of need. For one thing, a sizable number of them, mostly men, stayed for the winter, arriving between October and February and leaving in spring. Another telling characteristic was the long-term aid given to some individuals. One-quarter of the inmates in this study were admitted more than once; those persons were less likely to run away. A number of people received other forms of assistance before being admitted to the Almshouse. The fact that the typical stay was more than two months suggests that most of the inmates remained in the Almshouse out of convenience, regardless of their mode of entry.¹³

METHODOLOGY Our principal database for identifying, tracking, and analyzing the poor people is Boston Almshouse Register 4, which covers the period from 1795 to 1817, recording the admission and discharge of more than 8,000 people deemed eligible for poor assistance and endorsed by one or two overseers. The Almshouse Register provides limited descriptive information about the inmates—name, place of birth, adult or child, race (with some inconsistencies), and name of endorsing overseer. We inferred gen-

12 Town Meeting of January 21, 1801, Boston Town Meeting Records 9:190, reproduced as *BTR, 1801 to 1813* (1905), XXV, 115.

13 The percentage of repeat entries increases to 50% when the period from 1795 to 1817 is included. Ann Cox is an example of someone who received other kinds of assistance—in her case, wood and cash at her home from 1777 to 1783—as well as admittance to the almshouse multiple times from 1783 to 1792. Her case can be traced in Eric Nellis and Anne Decker Cecere (eds.), *The Eighteenth-Century Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor* (Boston, 2007).

der from names and sometimes from additional comments written by the clerk.¹⁴

We used GIS to input, manage, and visualize the information in the Almshouse records. To situate these Almshouse people geographically, we needed to know where they were living when admitted. Almshouse Register 4 is the first register to record the name of the overseer who endorsed each inmate's admission; since the records do not consistently do so before August 1795, our study begins in 1795. By matching overseers to wards, we could determine an inmate's approximate location before admission. The cases of inmates who returned to the Almshouse allowed us an opportunity to track the mobility of Boston's destitute poor. At first glance, the simplicity of our unit of representation, the ward, may seem to fly in the face of historical GIS applications that show the arbitrariness of administrative boundaries with regard to social phenomena. The ward, however, provided the only feasible way to locate the residence of almshouse inmates within the city. Although not optimal for the purpose at hand, the ward is hardly an arbitrary unit for this study; Boston's twelve wards were geographically compact neighborhoods with distinct sociodemographic characteristics. The basemap is shown in Figure 1.¹⁵

Using GIS, we aggregated individual records by ward, identified relations between the records (for instance, to trace recurrent entries), and mapped these results. We used thematic or choropleth maps to represent the distribution of sociodemographic character-

14 The Boston Almshouse Admission and Discharge Registers are part of the "Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733–1925" (hereinafter BOPR), located at the Massachusetts Historical Society, 1154 Boylston St., Boston. Since the pages of the Boston Almshouse admission and discharge registers are not numbered, we provide dates of admission for any person mentioned in this article. For the Colonial Society of Massachusetts' transcribed collection of records from the eighteenth-century office of the Overseer of the Poor, see Nellis and Cecere, *Eighteenth-Century Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor*, which allows readers to track Almshouse inmates over time. We used this volume to obtain background about Almshouse inmates who entered between 1795 and 1801.

15 The office of the Overseer of the Poor attracted men of wealth and status who tended to stay in office for years. For most of the period of study, Redford Webster administered Ward 1; Edward Proctor, Ward 2; Arnold Wells, Jr., Ward 3; Edward Edes, Ward 4; Thomas Perkins, Ward 5; William Smith, Ward 6; Jonathan Loring Austin, Ward 7; William Phillips, Jr., Ward 8; John Sweetser, Ward 9; Stephen Gorham, Ward 10; Oliver Brewster, Ward 11; and Henry Hill, Ward 12. Knowles, "Emerging Trends in Historical GIS," *Historical Geography*, XXXIII (2005), 8. That Boston's twelve wards were geographically compact neighborhoods with distinct sociodemographic characteristics is clearly demonstrated in Carr, *After the Siege*, 43–87, and Kulikoff, "Progress of Inequality," 394–398.

istics of the population. Each map represents a single variable in shades of gray. White corresponds to the lowest value, black to the highest value; the degree of darkness in the intermediate range is proportional to the value of the variable. Since all of the maps maintain the same scale and extents, each map can be compared to the entire series when viewed in juxtaposition. Although the geographical detail of our dataset does not attain the granularity of other urban analyses, the GIS tools enable the identification of recurrent entrants and family groups, representing their movements within the city throughout the period. To that end, we draw lines to connect the residents' movements between wards.¹⁶

INTENSITY OF ALMSHOUSE USE Figure 4 compares the geographical distribution of Almshouse inmates and taxpayer households, which we take as a proxy of the entire population. The 1,322 adults that the Almshouse admitted during the period targeted for this article, August 1795 to December 1801, amounts to more than one-third the number of the heads of household listed in the *Taking Book* of 1794. The two figures do not describe the same population; the lowest-income earners were not included in the tax lists. The Almshouse likely admitted a population in constant flux, moving wherever employment opportunities arose. Nonetheless, the ratio of Almshouse inmates to tax-paying households is a rough indicator of the demand for, and use of, the Almshouse.¹⁷

We refer to the ratio of inmates to taxpayers as “intensity of use” of the Almshouse (see Figure 5), which appears to correlate with the economic character of Boston's various wards. The North End—Wards 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5—was the most densely populated area in Boston, encompassing a “clutter of shipyards, shops, warehouses, and closely situated houses and garden plots.” The Central District—Wards 6, 8, and 9—was the commercial hub of Boston, where “the main market, local government offices, and the hive of

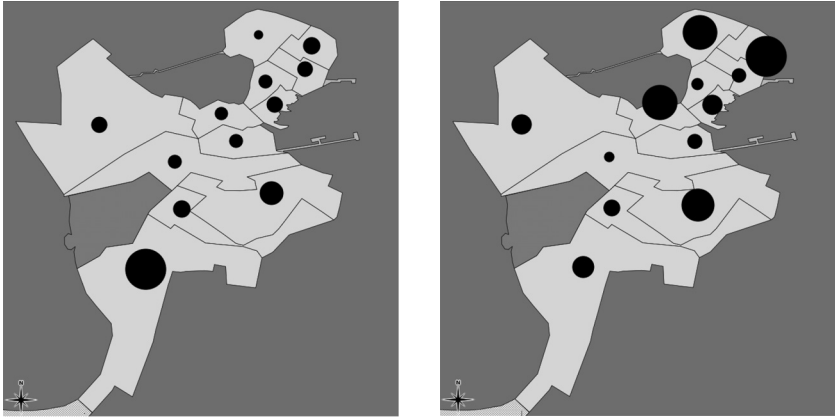
16 For the idea of serializing simple graphical representations, see Jacques Bertin, *Semiology of Graphics* (Madison, 1983). For a discussion of visualization and analytical strategies in historical applications of GIS, see Ian N. Gregory, “‘A Map is Just a Bad Graph’: Why Spatial Statistics Are Important in Historical GIS,” in Knowles and Hillier (eds.), *Placing History*, 123–150.

17 The 1,322 adult inmates in this study exclude individuals who re-entered the Almshouse from the same ward. In all of the maps, we restrict re-counts to adult inmates only to avoid the double counting of children in a family and to facilitate comparisons with heads of households. Jacqueline Barbara Carr-Frobose, “A Cultural History of Boston in the Revolutionary Era, 1775–1795,” unpub. Ph.D. diss. (Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1998), 145.

Fig. 4 Taxpayer Households and Almshouse Inmates

(A) Number of Taxpayer Households by Ward (1794)

(B) Number of Almshouse Inmates by Ward



SOURCE Taxpayer households from Jacqueline Barbara Carr-Frobese, “A Cultural History of Boston in the Revolutionary Era, 1775–1795,” unpub. Ph.D. diss. (Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1998), 145

business activity,” as well as the famous Long Wharf, were located. The West End, Ward 7, was still largely pastoral in 1800, with gardens and pasturage that bordered Boston Common and had only a few ropewalks as commercial businesses. The South End—Wards 10, 11, and 12—was the most sparsely populated region of the city, encompassing Boston Common and surrounding residential neighborhoods that accommodated travelers.¹⁸

The intensity of use also appears to correlate with the rate and nature of population growth in different sections of Boston. The fast-growing districts of the North End show a higher ratio, along with Ward 6 in the Central District. By contrast, the districts with “horizontal,” or land-extensive, growth in the West and South had smaller ratios, at or below average, indicating that genuine need lay behind use of the Almshouse since the fast-growing districts were likely to have inferior sanitary conditions and housing problems.

“Blacks,” “Negroes,” “mulattoes,” and other people of color comprised about 7.5 percent of the total inmate population (100 inmates)—a proportion that was twice as large as that of taxpaying

18 Carr, *After the Siege*, 65, 56, 68, 52–55.

Fig. 5 Intensity of Use

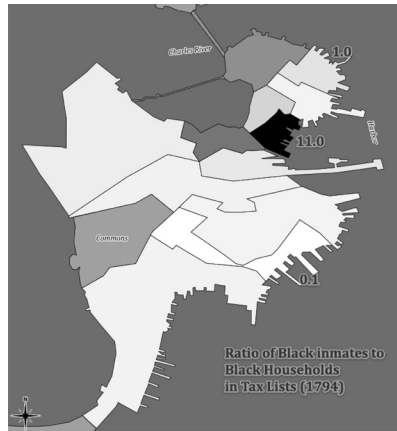
(A) Annual Rate of Growth in Taxpayer Households by Ward (1780–1794)



(B) Ratio of Inmates (1795–1801) to Taxpayer Households by Ward (1794)



(C) Ratio of Inmates of Color (1795–1801) to Black Taxpayer Households (1794)

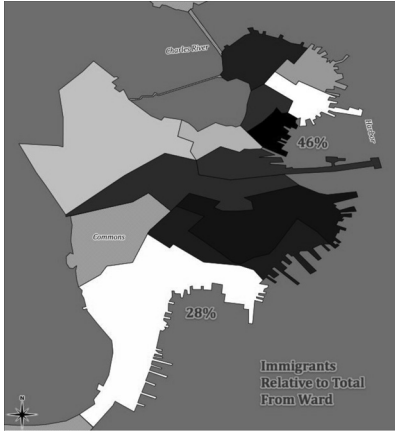


SOURCE Taxpayer households from Jacqueline Barbara Carr-Frobose, “A Cultural History of Boston in the Revolutionary Era, 1775–1795,” unpub. Ph.D. diss. (Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1998), 145, 180.

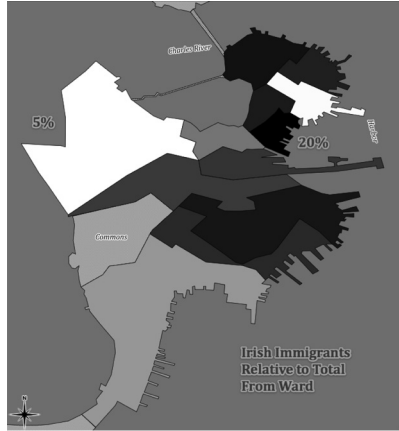
households to the total. Besides identifying race by the use of labels, we assumed that inmates born in Africa and the West Indies were people of color as well. In some cases, we found that a returning individual was registered as a person of color in some entries but not in all of them. The inmate-to-taxpayer ratio for the population of

Fig. 6 Clusters and Differentiation (Ratios of Immigrants and of Men to Total Inmates)

(A) Overseas Immigrants Relative to Total Number of Inmates in Ward



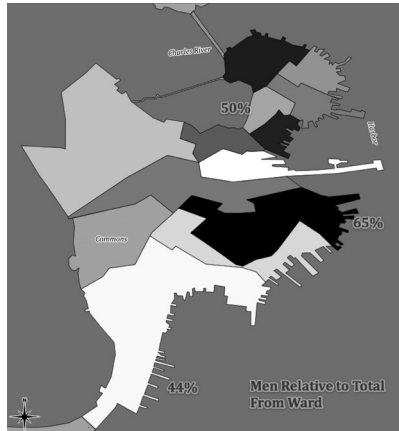
(B) Irish Relative to Total Number of Inmates in Ward



(C) New Englanders Relative to Total Number of Inmates in Ward



(D) Men Relative to Total Number of Inmates in Ward



color similarly highlights the high intensity of use in the North End and Ward 6 in the Central District, where the number of adult inmates of color exceeded the number of taxpayers in the district.

RESIDENTIAL CLUSTERING The panels in Figure 6 represent the percentage of immigrants and men relative to the total number of inmates from a ward. Immigrants from overseas, including the

Caribbean, comprised between 25 and 50 percent of the inmates from each ward, revealing the make-up of a true cosmopolitan city. They clustered primarily in the North End (with the exception of Ward 3), as well as in the northern South End (Ward 10). The Irish were one of the largest immigrant groups in the Almshouse, comprising between 5 and 20 percent of the total number of inmates from each ward. This large presence of Irish immigrants among the poor invites skepticism about the traditional emphasis on the “Irish invasion” of the mid-nineteenth century. As early as 1800, the Irish represented one-fifth of the Almshouse inmates from most of the North End wards. The counterpart to this pattern is the ward of origin for New Englanders, who clustered in the Boston neck (Ward 12) and the West End (Ward 7). The proportion of men among Almshouse inmates (Panel D in Figure 6) resembles the geographical distribution in the immigration maps because most of the immigrants were men. The West End and the southern South End had a small proportion of men, whereas the wards with a large proportion of immigrants (1, 5, and 10) also had a large proportion of men.¹⁹

To the extent that the almshouse population is representative of the poor, this research shows that Boston in 1800 was already a city of contrasts. The neighborhoods in the expanding south and west had the most consolidated population and the highest percentage of families. The population in the North End and the nearby Ward 6 was more transient, with a higher percentage of migrants in need of relief. In the long run, the answer to population growth was the expansion toward the south and west on reclaimed swamp lands. In the interim, the Almshouse provided the population in the most densely settled areas with a safety net.

RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY One of the most surprising findings of our study is the high degree of urban geographical mobility among recurrent inmates. “Repeat customers” to the Almshouse were the truly homeless of Boston. Unlike those who came only once during an economic crisis, repeat customers did not “belong” anywhere in the city. For the period of this study, about 25 percent of adult inmates (271 of 1,071) were admitted to the Almshouse more than once. More than 80 percent of them (218 cases) came

19 For the Irish invasion, see Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, 83.

from different wards in their subsequent admissions. The two series of maps showing geographical mobility attest to the high degree of movement among the Boston poor.

Panels A through C of Figure 7 focus on the life stories of the Cox women, two families of migrants from Europe (the Flynns from Ireland and the Peterses from France) and three families from the United States (Rebecca Smith, a black woman from Boston, and her son Lewis; the Melledges; and the Hamiltons). The maps show that these families and individuals moved throughout the city for twenty years and that precarious housing and employment conditions prompted their mobility.

John and Elizabeth Flynn illustrate intra-city mobility. The couple was first admitted to the Almshouse in 1787, though the records do not indicate their ward at that time. Later records show that John was born in Ireland and Elizabeth in Boston; the Almshouse clerk carefully labeled John a state charge and Elizabeth a town charge each time that they crossed the Almshouse threshold. When they first entered, Elizabeth stayed only one day, whereas John stayed seventeen months. Elizabeth appears to have brought her husband to the Almshouse for care and then returned to her work on the outside. John began his second stay at the Almshouse in January 1790, remaining there for seven months; this time he was admitted from Ward 10, in the South End.²⁰

The Flynns entered together in January 1794, this time from Ward 9, still in the South End. Elizabeth remained two and one-half months and John more than seven months. A few months later, they were re-admitted to the Almshouse, again from Ward 9. In December 1795, John and Elizabeth were admitted together, this time from Ward 7 in the West End. They stayed four months. Eighteen months later, in December 1796, the couple was admitted yet again, this time from Ward 2 in the North End. They stayed three months. In December 1797, they entered the Almshouse together for the last time, now from Ward 5, in the Central District. Elizabeth died one month later. John stayed for five years before being discharged in November 1802. He does not appear again in the Almshouse records. The Flynns had moved to every district in

20 Admissions and discharges for John and/or Elizabeth Flynn/Fling in Almshouse Registers 3 and 4 carry the following dates: April 16, 1787; April 17, 1787; September 24, 1788; January 15, 1790; August 30, 1790; January 7, 1794; March 24, 1794; August 22, 1794; January 6, 1795; April 13, 1795; December 4, 1795; December 29, 1796; December 4, 1797.

Fig. 7 Residential Mobility

(A) The Cox Family
(Widow and Family)



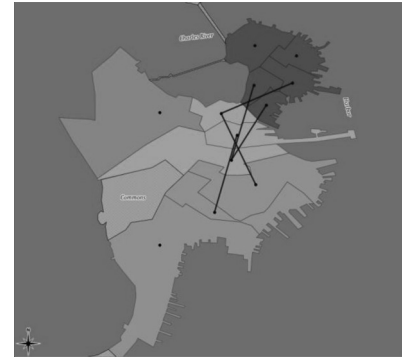
(B) The Flynns (Irish) and
the Peterses (French)



(C) Rebecca Smith and Children
(Black, US), and Hamilton and Melledge
Families (White, US)



(D) Significant Correlations



the city between 1787 and 1797. They found places to live (and perhaps work) in the South End, the West End, the North End, and the Central District.

Panel D in Figure 7 is more tentative in its attempts to map regularities in the movement of the Boston poor. It is based on all of the recurrent adult inmates re-admitted at least once to the Almshouse. Whereas the original spreadsheet has one row for each admission and one column for each characteristic (date of admission, discharge, place of birth, admitting overseer of the poor, etc.), we devised a table that has one row for each recurrent inmate, and

one column for each ward in which the individual lived. The Flynns have one row each. The columns corresponding to Wards 2, 5, 7, 9, and 10 have values of 1 because they lived in them; all of the other columns have values of 0. This table is suitable for a correlation analysis of the typical combinations of wards in the six-year span that this study covers. Each line in the map represents a common path of inter-ward mobility that passed the statistical significance test of a logit correlation.²¹

The map shows that the economic heart of the city, the central wards, were also a typical stop for mobile Almshouse inmates. This area had more employment opportunities and was close to other districts of the city. The high cost of rent in the central area of the city probably inclined laborers and casual workers to seek housing in the cheaper districts in the surrounding areas. Note that the West End is the most isolated area in this representation of the Almshouse poor's experience. In line with the other series of maps, the West End had more families, women, and locals from the Almshouse population—people who were less likely to change residence in the city—than other areas. The availability of land in this ward likely enabled more affordable housing.²²

Three major conclusions follow from this investigation of the geographical distribution of the Boston poor as reflected in the Almshouse Register between 1795 and 1801. First, the Almshouse saw unequal use by area in the city of Boston. The ratio of Almshouse inmates to taxpayer households was highest in the northern North End (Wards 1 and 2), close to 100 percent, implying that the Almshouse probably accepted a large percentage of the population in those wards. The ratio was also high among people of color. The people who lived in the northern North End were probably in a more vulnerable economic position than residents elsewhere in the city. Boston was growing horizontally toward the west and the south, but the population was increasing at a faster rate in the northern North End. The population in this densely packed part of the city depended on seasonal labor and had few resources during economic downturns.

21 This representation includes only positive correlation coefficients; negative correlations (meaning an uncommon path of mobility) were not represented.

22 We lack information about the cost of housing, but mean taxable wealth (primarily real estate wealth) by ward serves as a reasonable proxy. See Kulikoff, "Progress of Inequality," 394.

The typical Almshouse inmate from the North End was a transient, single, immigrant male. The North End was also home to the highest proportion of inmates of color in the Almshouse, even though its proportion of people of color was the lowest in the city. People from this part of the city and from Ward 6 (the central commercial area) used the Almshouse most intensively. In the southern South End and the West End, the ratio of inmates to households was much lower, suggesting a lower intensity of use in areas where land was more available and where housing needs were less pressing.

Second, from the point of view of the Almshouse, Boston displayed distinct patterns of residential differential. Almshouse women tended to come from the West End (Ward 7) and southern South End (Ward 12), the areas with more open spaces and farm land. Almshouse men tended to come from Wards 1, 2, and 10, indicating a migrant workforce. New Englanders in the Almshouse tended to come from the West End and the southern South End. The South End, the West End, and Ward 3 in the North End sent relatively few foreign-born people to the Almshouse. These patterns, however, did not constitute a clearly segregated city. One-quarter to one-half of the Almshouse inmates from every ward were foreign-born—never below 25 percent and never above 50 percent. Irish-born Almshouse inmates constituted at least 10 percent but no more than 20 percent in most wards.

Finally, Almshouse inmates showed a high degree of residential mobility between the wards, which probably inhibited class-based geographical segregation. We have presented maps of several typical cases. The poorest members of the population were on the move in Boston, possibly evicted from their houses, following jobs, or dodging magistrates and police. The precarious nature of their residence was a central feature of the Almshouse poor's urban experience. In their life outside the Almshouse, they did not exactly share the streets with Boston's wealthier citizens. But their movement helped to make Boston a dynamic place; the geographical distribution of its poorest residents shifted dynamically throughout the period.

Through the prism of the Almshouse data, Boston's differentiated regions look to have been in constant flux. Immigrants, men, and women tended to evince distinct residential patterns, and residential moves between the wards created contact between various sections of the city. Hence, long-held assumptions about the static

“social topography” of the city stressing spatial integration and the close proximity of different classes and occupational groups in pre-industrial urban environments come into question.

The broad outlines of an unequal city are usually set in contrast with a diversity only visible on a smaller scale. Kulikoff’s and Schweitzer’s studies of Boston and Philadelphia after the revolution portrayed two cities with a strong and increasing degree of economic, and even social, differentiation, even if these cities were not as segregated as they were to become in the industrial era. If we had restricted our study to a sociodemographic characterization of the inmates by ward, our results would be consistent with this idea. Most of the inmates in the Boston Almshouse came from the poorest corner of the city (the North End), and they clearly fell into patterns of differentiation by national origin and sex. But they also circulated throughout the city, including the central wards where the wealthiest households were located. The strong residential mobility of the Almshouse’s recurrent users attests to the strategies of the poor in response to various pressures and life events. Boston was a vibrant collection of people, not a social topography fixed in time and space. By moving around the city, people constantly recreated the city and challenged its contours.²³

23 The resourcefulness of poor nineteenth-century urban residents of North American and European cities is well explored in Derosas, “Residential Mobility in Venice”; Gilliland, “Modeling Residential Mobility in Montreal”; Kok, Mandemakers, and Wals, “City Nomads: Changing Residence as a Coping Strategy, Amsterdam”; and Thernstrom and Knights, “Men in Motion: Some Data and Speculations about Urban Population Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America.”

