

History of Salem Town Welfare

By Robert Loranger – Salem Welfare Director 1980-2008

“Resolve not to be poor: whatever you have, spend less. Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness; it certainly destroys liberty, and it makes some virtues impracticable and others extremely difficult.”

Samuel Johnson, 1782

Salem, as every community throughout history has had to respond to how it treats its indigent. Whether one without resources or means was a widow, suddenly or unexpectedly left a pauper; or a child, through tragedy or circumstances, without parents or anyone else to care, or someone disabled by disease or by accident; or countless other circumstances that unfortunately dot the trail of history here as elsewhere.

The foundation to Salem Town Welfare was laid in England in 1601 with what was called the Elizabethan Poor Laws, or English Poor Laws. They were intended to regulate begging and to restrict travel of the poor who were fleeing the bonded labor of serfs to find work in growing towns and cities.

The English pilgrims carried their laws to their new home in America. The New Hampshire law that mandates local welfare, Chapter 165, Aid to Assisted Persons, still includes the original poor law precepts of: taxing local property owners, local administration, holding relatives responsible, providing less aid than the lowest paid worker, and a work program or work home component.

Indigent care is not a phenomenon of our day or of this century nor has it ever always been a caring undertaking. In New Hampshire as early as 1652 the City of Portsmouth in an effort to discourage indigents from settling there imposed a fine on anyone harboring them. Even before Salem was incorporated the Selectmen of the early seacoast towns cared for the poor at town expense, as if they were a legal resident, and if they thought they deserved help. Often shelter was provided at a resident's home. Some Towns, as Salem eventually did in 1843, built poor houses and workhouses.

In 1718, the New Hampshire Legislature recognizing the seriousness of poverty required all towns to tax themselves to meet the indigent needs.

In "History of Salem New Hampshire 1735-1907" the author Gilbert recorded a few Town incidents and events involving indigents and indigent care. In a 1774 Town Meeting article the Town voted no "To see what the Town will do towards the support of" a young girl that the death of a mother had left an orphan. The author speculated that the voters considered it the business of someone other than the Town.

As early as 1779 there are records of indigents being auctioned to be cared for by citizens who were low bidders.

"If it was one who could be of some assistance in the household the bid would be lower than for one who would be more of a care. Sometimes the entire lot was struck off to one man for a stated sum. This method became more and more in vogue as time went on. In 1824 the town's poor were struck off to John Kimball for \$325.00 for the present year".

Later, "John Palmer for the place formerly owned by Evan Jones," the Town had its first

poor farm. In 1857 a new poor house was built. In 1902 the Town sold the poor farm and “sent its few paupers to the county farm in Brentwood”.

The State Legislature increased the number of indigents classed as county poor and in 1868 the Rockingham County established a poor farm where many of Salem’s indigent were sent. The County poor houses disappeared in the 1960’s and the responsibility of caring for the indigent were shared by “the local overseers of the poor” and county welfare administration. In 1986 the New Hampshire Legislature eliminated county welfare and settlement laws that required a time to build residency. The responsibility of caring for residents with emergency and temporary needs became the sole responsibility of the towns and cities.

Meanwhile, in 1976 Salem and every other municipality was required to have its own set of welfare guidelines. With federal, state, and private social service programs the nature of Town Welfare and caring for the poor became more complex. In 1976 the Town of Salem hired its first professional full-time Welfare Administrator.