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**“A POOR WOMAN WANTS PERMIT TO GO TO ALMSHOUSE”:
WOMEN, GENDER AND POVERTY IN NEW YORK’S BURNED-OVER DISTRICT,
1821-1861**

by

Sherri Goldstein Cash

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "John C. Cole", is written over a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation studies poor women and the poverty relief system in New York's "Burned-Over District," the region comprising the Erie Canal corridor, during the period 1821-1860. The study offers a response to the historiography of middle-class formation in the region, which has largely omitted discussion of the working class and particularly the poor. While charitable work was critical in middle-class women's activities, poor women themselves are shadowy figures in the historiography. The following dissertation attempts to elucidate who poor women in the region were and why and how they used the poverty relief system. The study also uses gender as a framework of analysis in examining the middle-class discourse about poverty, the poor and especially poor women. In this discourse, able-bodied married and widowed women appeared as relatively deserving of assistance or as "worthy" poor for much of the period while single mothers and childless single women appeared as "unworthy." By the end of the antebellum era, only downwardly mobile, formerly middle-class, white, Protestant women appeared in the discourse as poor women who were entitled to public dependence.

Chapter 1

“a poor woman wants permit to go to almshouse”: Women, Gender and Poverty in New York’s Burned-Over District, 1821-1861

Introduction

The idea for this dissertation emerged in the mid-1990s, in the context of a national debate about the welfare system. Within the general topic of welfare, I was fascinated by the idea that the "face" of welfare as it seemed to exist in the minds of many white Americans belonged to an African-American woman, even while more white than black women were welfare recipients. I had a hunch that the prevailing ideological association between racial minority status and public dependency had its roots in the antebellum era, a time of mass immigration, particularly of poor Irish Catholics. In my research into the relief systems of several Western New York counties, I found that poorhouse records and other official documents focused increasingly on the foreign birth of poverty relief recipients. Due to their dominance of relief rolls in the early nineteenth century, Irish Catholics, from the perspective of white, native-born, middle-class Protestants, appeared to be the most guilty of the dual crimes of poverty and public dependence. According to the middle class, foreign birth was the "cause" of increasing poverty relief expenditures. By the 1850s, various relief reformers and other critics began to call for more harsh measures in provisioning the predominantly foreign-born, able-bodied poor.

While I found one motivation for this study in my presentist interest in poor women and the welfare system, my second motivation lay in my frustration with the literature on antebellum middle-class formation. Paul E. Johnson in *A Shopkeeper's*

Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837 , Nancy Hewitt in Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872 and Mary P. Ryan in Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 study an era marked by immigration and especially the immigration of Irish Catholics, in a region where it was largely the Irish who built and labored on the canal that opened Western New York to commercialization and class formation, and provided laborers for its businesses and middle-class homes. In these accounts, immigrants are mysteriously absent.¹ Simply put, I wondered "where are the Irish?" And, if the Irish and other marginal and chronically poor people are absent in the literature, so is their agency. Thus, poor women in the literature of (middle) class formation in the Burned-Over District are little more than the shadowy objects of middle-class women's activism.

In part, the cause of the omission of Irish Catholic immigrants and poor women's agency in the historiography of middle-class formation in the Burned-Over District lies in the difficulty of studying "inarticulate" people of the past. In her landmark study of women and middle-class formation, for example, Ryan cites the "stinginess" of historical documents referring to the immigrants and non-Protestants who comprised about 40% of Oneidans by 1850, while she found a "wealth of historical evidence about the private lives" of the emergent middle-class.² Unlike middle-class people, working-class Americans and particularly the most marginal among them did not leave diaries, the minutes of organizational meetings or other written commentary. A search for working-

¹ Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*

(New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Mary P. Ryan *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

² Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. xiii.

class and especially immigrant women in the antebellum Erie Canal region required research into another body of documents. In my research, I found these women when poverty pressed them into public records.

Even while poverty relief offers evidence of early nineteenth century poor women, this evidence is still relatively rare. Therefore, amassing enough information about these women required a research method that went beyond the strict geographical confines of the community study. To find a significant amount of information about these women, I cast a wider net over the counties along the Erie Canal corridor. The reliability of this methodology is supported by the transience across the region of the most marginal working-class people, mainly immigrants, as well as a predominant ideology of poverty and the poor among the native-born, Protestant middle-class, not only across the region but over the Northeast generally. Moreover, no one county offered evidence that covered the whole antebellum period. Piecing together documents from several Erie Canal counties including Erie, Niagara, Monroe, Oneida and Albany Counties and state-wide reports on the county relief systems has helped to form a picture of how and why women used relief, how they were treated in these county-based but highly similar systems and how gender played a role in poverty policy and middle-class ideology about the poor during the early industrial era.

As in the historiography of middle-class formation in the Burned-Over District, poor women in the historiography of social welfare tend to lack agency. As histories of policy primarily, such works are "top-down" approaches to studying poverty. For example, Walter Trattner in his chronologically sweeping survey of poverty and policy, From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America, mentions poor women in their vulnerability as widows and mothers. Michael B. Katz in his broad and important analysis of poverty and policy, In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social

History of Welfare in America, too, remarks on the distinct situation of women who have needed poverty relief. His brief focus on women relief recipients tends to appear beginning with the late nineteenth century when some sources discussed women relief recipients specifically, and when social workers and relief agencies began to focus more on women. In general, these social welfare historians, like Robert E. Cray, Jr., in Paupers and Poor Relief in New York City and Its Rural Environs, 1700-1830, tend to allude to the women who "required relief. Their limited economic opportunities combined with social restraints made working-class women possible candidates for public welfare."³

Generally, the goals of the historiography of colonial, late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century social welfare programs have been to analyze the motivations for and effectiveness of nineteenth century relief policies, especially as seen in the "poorhouse movement."⁴ David J. Rothman in The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic, best exemplifies the social control perspective on poorhouses, arguing that these institutions, like prisons and insane asylums, aimed to reform as well as punish the poor. Katz echoes this explanation and emphasizes the cruelty and failure of poorhouses to mitigate, if not eliminate, poverty. In her study, "Poor Relief Policy in Antebellum New York State: The Rise and Decline of the Poorhouse," Joan Underhill Hannon concludes that "the poorhouse appears to have been largely an inappropriate response to the relief problems of antebellum New York State." Glenn C. Altschuler, in "Clearinghouse for Paupers: The Poorfarm of Seneca County, New York, 1830-1860" argues that county administrators were not interested in

³ Robert E. Cray, Jr., *Paupers and Poor Relief in New York City and Its Rural Environs, 1700-1830*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 157.

⁴ "Poorhouse movement" is Joan Underhill Hannon's term in "Poor Relief Policy in Antebellum New York State: The Rise and Decline of the Poorhouse," *Explorations in Economic History*, 22 (1985), 234.

"rehabilitating" the poor but rather in quickly getting them off relief rolls and reducing social welfare expenses.⁵

More recent works have illuminated the implications and effects of early poverty relief on women. Mimi Abramovitz in Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present centers women and gender in her survey of poverty policy. Her purpose is to trace change over time in relief policy with regard to women. Too, she seeks to put to rest perceptions of women's poverty as originating in the industrial era, positing that "it is not widely known that the povertization of women also dates back to colonial times. By the early eighteenth century, in some towns women comprised from one third to one half of a town's paupers."⁶ In "Nineteenth-Century Welfare Policy, Programs, and Poor Women: Philadelphia as a Case Study," Priscilla Ferguson Clement asks "To what extent were public and private welfare policies and programs then responsive to the needs of impoverished women?"⁷ Clement traces the gendered policies and effects of Philadelphia's public and private charity systems. Some works in English social welfare history of the early nineteenth century, too, center women and gender in analyses of policy. In "A culture of poverty? The St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse, 1817," Lynn MacKay examines the ways that the gendered policy of an English workhouse perpetuated the poverty of women inmates.⁸ Lisa Forman Cody in

⁵ Glenn C. Altschuler, "Clearinghouse for Paupers: The Poorfarm of Seneca County, New York, 1830-1860," *Journal of Social History*, 17, No. 4 (1984), 573-600.

⁶ Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1996), p. 76.

⁷ Priscilla Ferguson Clement, "Nineteenth-Century Welfare Policy, Programs, and Poor Women: Philadelphia as a Case Study," *Feminist Studies*, 1992, 18, No. 1 (1992), 35-58.

⁸ Lynn MacKay, "A culture of poverty?: The St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse, 1817," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 26 (Fall 1995), p. 209 (23); Lisa Forman Cody, "The Politics of Illegitimacy in an Age of Reform: Women, Reproduction, and Political Economy in England's New Poor Law of 1834," *Journal of Women's History*, 11, i4 (Winter 2000), p. 131.

"The Politics of Illegitimacy in an Age of Reform: Women, Reproduction, and Political Economy in England's New Poor Law of 1834" discusses the "bastardy clauses" that abolished parish support to single mothers as well as punished "bastard-bearers" who could not support their children.

Yet, taken together, all of the above works beg implicitly for a discussion of women's agency. What can we learn about poor women themselves? What did public relief mean to them? How did they utilize the "public charity" made available to them? In what ways did they shape the relief system?

Inspired by Linda Gordon's work in Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence. Boston. 1880-1960 and Marilyn Schultz Blackwell's "The Deserving Sick: Poor Women and the Medicalization of Poverty in Brattleboro, Vermont," works that discern the ways that poor women shaped the policies and programs from which they sought help, this dissertation seeks to discover poor women's agency, choices and survival strategies involving early nineteenth-century poverty relief.⁹ In centering agency, the dissertation offers a "bottom-up" perspective on the history of poor women and elucidates the ways that women utilized and shaped the relief system. Furthermore, the dissertation juxtaposes poor women's agency with the changing context of a middle-class ideology of poverty and in an effort to give poor women a "voice" in antebellum debates on poverty and relief.

On another level, this bottom-up approach reveals the importance of religion as a framework for understanding the class conflict that framed the relief system. In the historiography of middle-class formation in the Burned-Over District, religion pertains

⁹ Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988); Marilyn Schultz Blackwell, "The Deserving Sick: Poor Women and the Medicalization of Poverty in Brattleboro, Vermont," *Journal of Women's History*, 11, 11 (Spring 1999) p. 53.

largely to the Protestant middle class. Ryan, for one, argues that evangelical Protestant revivalism of the early nineteenth century opened the door to an era of "associationalism" that fostered a new culture of family and the inculcation of values that produced the emergent middle class. Subsequently, Oneidans retreated into a private form of family in which women reproduced the middle-class through their socialization of children. Ryan's purpose is to show that the "history of class and religion was hopelessly entangled with questions of family and gender," yet the contours of social class in Ryan's work seem incomplete.¹⁰ For Ryan, evangelical Protestantism was an ideology that provided a new culture of family and reconstructed gender roles. In this sense, religion offered a set of values that would create a middle class as well as the means for sustaining it. Yet while religion played a critical role in middle-class formation, working-class people seem not to have had religion or religious culture at all.

Furthermore, according to Ryan, by 1850, Oneida women had established "a maze of female agencies of social service," including Catholic and Episcopalian orphan asylums and Utica's first hospital, established by the Catholic Sisters of Charity.¹¹ Yet, while Ryan celebrates this pluralistic female participation in social welfare organizations, she observes that "the private female method of dispensing welfare was highly inefficient" in part because the private women's welfare system "competed for clients." According to Ryan, "Protestants and Catholics strove to bring the city's poor under the jurisdiction of their own beliefs and culture, rather than to meet the material needs of a diverse population in a simple straightforward manner."¹²

¹⁰ Ryan, p. 12.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 212.

¹² Ibid., p. 217.

Ryan misses what was at stake for charity providers of the different classes. As has been recounted in the historiography of antebellum anti-Catholicism, native-born Americans feared Catholic immigrants politically and socially. On the one hand, they feared that the Pope would use an army of Catholic immigrants to subjugate the democratic institutions of the U.S. government, while, on the other hand, the immigrants themselves would subvert American society by practicing and propagating an immoral culture that would stifle independence and upward mobility.¹³ Protestant charity women sought the conversion of poor Catholic children believing that they were "saving" them. In at least some cases, as Nancy Hewitt has shown, female charity organizations denied charity to Catholic women. Meanwhile the Catholic church in Western New York organized its own social welfare organizations as a way of assisting those in need and helping Catholics to avoid Protestant proselytizing. In short, the efforts of Protestant benevolence activists and Catholic nuns were tied to a religious politics of class. Thus, while Ryan posits that "female charities could impose their own ethnocentric values on a dependent population" and that this was an obstruction to efficient distribution of charity, efficiency was not really their goal.¹⁴

Similarly, Hewitt and Johnson discuss religion among the middle class but are almost silent about religion among working class people, precluding the idea that religion was a factor in working class life. Religion as a factor in class formation is marginalized

¹³ Historians have well documented nineteenth century anti-Catholicism. See Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1986); Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Ryan, p. 217.

in Abramovitz's work as well. She mentions that "Calvinist ideas about the virtues of hard work and the sins of idleness left the colonies with little sympathy for the able-bodied poor."¹⁵ Though, she does refer to religious difference and distance among the classes when she posits that immigrants were "cultural and religious `foreigners.'"¹⁶

At least one historian centers religion in an analysis of the antebellum working class. Jama Lazerow in Religion and the Working Class in Antebellum America centers evangelical Protestantism in an analysis of working-class consciousness and resistance. Lazerow argues that early nineteenth century labor protest among native-born workers in New England and upstate New York, mostly artisans and craftsmen, was evangelical Protestant religious protest. In other words, workers responded to changing social and economic conditions as Christian workers. According to Lazerow, evangelical Protestantism was not exclusively a middle-class phenomenon but stemmed from a common Protestant heritage upon which both classes drew in an effort to promote and achieve social change. According to Lazerow, native-born labor activists utilized their religious culture to agitate for labor reforms, for example, as seen in the ten-hour workday movement. Lazerow does not offer Protestant labor's ideology of poverty. However, in framing worker protest as Protestant evangelical social activism, however, one might infer that these activists, like middle-class perfectionist reformers, believed that poverty would be eliminated through individual moral reform.¹⁷ This shared ideology would not be surprising since, as Lazerow argues, evangelical Protestant laborers participated in the middle-class culture of moral reform.

¹⁵Abramovitz, p. 77.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁷ Jama Lazerow, *Religion and the Working Class in Antebellum America*: (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998).

Protestantism and Catholicism offered competing views of society and poverty in the Burned-Over District. Evangelical Protestants sought social change through individual moral reform and self-improvement as well as upward mobility. In the Protestant ideology of the early industrial era, the poor, and especially poor, able-bodied men, were the authors of their own impoverishment. Protestant ideology demanded reform and punishment of the poor. In contrast, Jay P. Dolan in *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* posits that as a conservative religious ideology, Catholicism was not "a catalyst for social change."¹⁸ As Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and Paul Slack in *The English Poor Law, 1531-1782*, have argued, in Catholic religious ideology, the poor were a perpetual segment of society and the more fortunate were bound to help them.¹⁹ According to Maureen Fitzgerald in "Charity, Poverty, and Child Welfare," "very few Catholics, and even fewer Irish...held that poverty was attributable to individual traits or moral depravity. Catholics did not emphasize...that aid [to the poor] was in itself an evil, but held instead that alleviating suffering was their Christian duty." Catholic ideology accepted poverty and the poor as inevitable.²⁰ These two competing views of poverty and the poor are evident in the arena of poverty relief. In tracing this contestation, the dissertation demonstrates that the religious ideology of the Second Great Awakening and the ideology of industrial capitalism were contested on religious grounds.

¹⁸ Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p.169.

¹⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 21st ed., trans. Talcott Parsons (London: HarperCollins Academic, 1991); Paul Slack, *The English Poor Law, 1531-1782* (Indianapolis: Macmillan, 1990).

²⁰ Maureen Fitzgerald, "Charity, Poverty, and Child Welfare," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 25 (No.4, 1996), p. 15.

As in the literature of middle-class formation in the Burned-Over District, in Christine Stansell's study of New York City, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860, religious identity as a framework of analysis is largely absent except insofar as it pertained to the middle class. Stansell writes that

Before 1846, the newcomers tended to be poor but not necessarily penniless: The Irish...were often Protestant farmers and skilled craftsmen from the North, although canal and railroad construction projects also drew thousands of Catholic peasants and cottiers who ended up as day laborers in the States.²¹

In this way, religion among the working class merely distinguishes among Irish immigrants, sometimes as rival factions like Protestant and Catholic gangs.²² Stansell posits that the working poor of New York were mainly immigrants. While Catholics dominated the immigrant population as Irish and Germans, she concludes that the working poor were "a generally irreligious poor."²³ For Stansell this irreligiosity lies in the lack of working-class participation in antebellum Protestant evangelical revivalism. Even while she mentions "the obstinately Catholic Irish," religion, for Stansell, exists in the middle class. For example, "religious zeal," according to Stansell, "was not simply a cloak for class domination. Rather, evangelical men and women understood class in religious terms."²⁴ Yet, Catholics, too, and specifically, Irish Catholics understood class in religious terms.

This dissertation focusing on women, gender, poverty and public relief reveals the ways that many women lived in and through the times of destitution that continually threatened and punctuated antebellum working-class life. Over the period, middle-class

²¹ Ibid., p. 44.

²² Ibid., p. 59.

²³ Ibid., p. 66.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

relief reformers increasingly associated the causes of poverty with foreign birth and conceptualized solutions for poverty that were increasingly harsh. Within this framework, middle-class constructions of poor women changed so that by the 1850s, poor women were subsumed in inferior social categories that deemed them as part of the "unworthy" poor. In spite of these ideological and particularly gendered changes that shaped the relief system from the top-down, poor women in some ways shaped the relief system in utilizing poverty relief for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. On another level of resistance, Catholics, as represented by the Church and Catholic press, challenged the native-born, middle-class, Protestant constructions of poverty, gender and the poor that grew to prominence in the Second Great Awakening as well as in the secular relief system shaped by Protestant ideology.

The first portion of Chapter Two, "'Remember the Widow and the Fatherless': Middle-Class Views of Poverty and its Solutions, 1821-1850" examines several texts concerning poor people, and discerns and compares native-born perspectives on the immigrant and non-immigrant poor. Within this framework, married, widowed, single, pregnant, immigrant and native-born poor women appear as either worthy of help or pitiable and fascinating yet distant, unreachable or altogether invisible. The chapter also presents the history of New York's revamped relief system, an intended solution for the state's crisis of industrial poverty. Early poorhouse data bring to light the already high percentage of immigrants in the region. The chapter elucidates a middle-class ideology of poverty and the poor that was biased against Irish immigrants, antedating the swell of anti-Catholicism that would mark later decades. At the same time, this ideology of poverty was paralleled by a fractured image of poor women. Concurrently, the new relief system was beset by the mission and problem of discerning the "worthy" and "unworthy" poor. The combination of anti-Irish sentiment and the goal of distinguishing the worthy

and unworthy poor laid the foundation of public policy and public discourse about poor women in the latter antebellum decades.

The latter portions of Chapter Two trace the history of middle-class discourse about the poor and poverty relief. The discussion follows the themes of poor women and anti-foreign sentiment. Becoming explicit in the context of the 1830s temperance movement, one relief reformer studying New York's relief system concluded that intemperate men, mainly immigrants, were failing to fulfill their roles as breadwinners. He concluded that the result was a virtual epidemic of wives and children reduced to impoverishment. This emphasis on men as the cause of poverty continued through the 1840s, as evidenced by the discourse among a variety of other middle-class reformers and commentators. Immigrant men were the specific focus in this ideology as the cause of poverty. Between these two frameworks, one on poor men and the other on foreigners, poor women relief recipients emerged as the dependent economic and social victims of men. In this ideology, poor wives and children could be helped only through reform of intemperate men. Silence in the discourse about childless, single women indicated that reformers were not concerned with their impoverishment.

By 1849, relief administrators, reformers and commentators focused more attention on the nativity of relief recipients including African-Americans. Evidently, it is within this context that Irish immigrant women appeared in the poverty discourse as imbued with latent virtues of middle-class motherhood in combination with native-born assumptions of Irish cultural inferiority. In a revealing text about an "Irish Mother," the presumably native-born writer conveys the message that poor Irish immigrant women needed only to adopt the middle-class work ethic as a way of pulling themselves and their children out of poverty. This idea marked a transition in middle-class ideology of

women, gender and poverty that became more explicit in the 1850s, the subject of Chapter Four.

Chapter Three, "'A poor woman wants permit to go to almshouse': Poor Women, Agency and Poverty Relief," presents an analysis of who poor women were and how they used poverty relief. The chapter reveals poor women's agency in utilizing the resources available to them through public poverty relief. While poor women were nearly invisible and passive recipients of middle-class women's "benevolence" in the literature of gendered middle-class formation in the "Burned Over District," this chapter reframes them as strategists over their own survival, even while they had only a limited field of opportunities and choices available to them. This perspective on poor women provides a hidden history of the women rendered invisible or mute in the middle-class poverty discourse traced in the previous chapter.

According to the relief reformers of the 1850s, discussed in Chapter Four, "'A daily martyrdom': Women, Gender and Relief Policy in the 1850s," poor women, mainly foreigners, were no longer entitled to dependence. This change occurred in tandem with a reconstruction of the poorhouse as an institution rather than a casual "home" of sorts. (This transition was not unlike the change in households resulting in impersonal relationships between employers and employees that Paul E. Johnson documents in *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*.²⁵) For working-class women, this change in the meaning and shape of "home" meant that "home" was something to be afforded, as in the middle-class. If a middle-class woman could no longer afford a home, say, after the death of her husband, she was entitled to public dependence. Moreover, this entitlement was

²⁵ Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

intertwined with constructions of race and religion so that white, native-born, Protestant, middle-class women's downward mobility marked entitlement to public dependence.

Chapter 2

“Remember the Widow and the Fatherless”: Middle-Class Views Of Poverty And Its Solutions, 1821–1850

During the antebellum era, a middle-class discourse about poverty emerged in the Erie Canal region that, in its discussion and silences about women, reflected how the dominant, middle-class, native-born society perceived poor women. The generally sympathetic theme in this discourse focused on married and widowed women, particularly those who had fallen from a level of “competency,” if not comfort, into poverty as husbands died or failed to fulfill the breadwinner role. At the same time, single women and single mothers, from the middle-class perspective, existed outside the bounds of society, and so they appeared as merely shadowy figures in the discourse. The women in the poverty discourse were embedded in an ideological framework that increasingly correlated chronic poverty with immigrants, and most especially the Irish, rather than with the structural causes that made them poor. The conflation of foreign birth and destitution reflected the growth of an expanding population of immigrant, marginal working-class and chronically poor people. Within a decade after the completion of the Erie Canal, the new poorhouses of the Burned-Over District had become filled with foreign-born paupers. In 1830, immigrants accounted for (33 of 95 =) over 33 percent of the paupers inmates of the Niagara County Poorhouse. Just two years later, immigrants comprised (111 of 168 =) 66 percent of the paupers there. Similarly, in 1835, immigrants represented (254 of 409 =) 62 percent of the inmates at the Erie County Poorhouse.¹

In the early 1820s, when the Erie Canal was yet uncompleted, Western New York was becoming home to the industrial class structure emerging in the Northeast, a process

¹ Chipman, p. 46; Erie County Almshouse Registers.

that included the growth of poverty. While access to land, capital and affluent kin networks had positioned some for middle-class stability in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the wage-dependent laboring class faced greater economic insecurity. A continuing trend of land shortages over the eighteenth century had weakened patriarchal control over grown children and drove sons away in search of other means of support.² High inflation, depression and economic dislocation in the post-Revolutionary era exacerbated these conditions. In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, a rapidly growing number of Americans were becoming marginal to rural society and sought work outside of agriculture.³ Seasonal and systemic unemployment, inadequate wages and a lack of protections for workers and their families swelled the ranks of the poor. As Christine Stansell observes, poverty was no longer connected to the inability to work, as it had been in the pre-industrial economy; in the nineteenth century, poverty became directly connected to the nature of work itself.⁴ By the 1820s, poverty had become a major social problem.⁵

Working-class women were particularly affected by the early nineteenth century's large economic and social changes. Women carried the double burden of being workers and female in an economy that held out more limited and lower paying opportunities to them while offering "dependence" on working-class men who could not earn enough to achieve "independence." During the antebellum era, many working-class women were alienated from community and family networks that had controlled but also protected daughters, wives, spinsters and widows. With migration to cities and away from

² See Philip J. Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970).

³ Paul E. Johnson, "The Modernization of Greenleaf and Abigail Patch," in Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *Women, Families, and Communities: Readings in American History*, Vol. I (Glenview, Ill: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1990), pp. 90-104.

⁴ Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class In New York, 1789-1860*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), pp 3-4.

⁵ See Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), p. 9; Stansell, pp. 3-10.

communities, young men were more free from the obligation to marry, while young women had lost the support of communities that pressured men into marriage. As an effect of the decline of home production and the greater need for cash, daughters left home in search of work. Widows and spinsters increasingly lost the support of communities that had absorbed them into the homes of kin and neighbors or encouraged remarriage. Moreover, working-class women faced low pay and few economic opportunities. Meanwhile, the economic and social fate of married women was tied to the economic instability of their husbands. The lack of kin and community supports, women's inferior economic and social position and the instability of working-class men left women at risk of impoverishment.⁶

According to Mimi Abramovitz, "the debilitating new forms of economic insecurity which accompanied the shift from an agricultural to a wage-labor force...overwhelmed the capacity of the colonial poor laws to assist those in need."⁷ In response, New York State, for one, reformed its poverty relief system. In 1824, John V.N. Yates, New York's Secretary of State recommended broad changes in the state's poor relief system. Previously, towns provided for their own indigents through "temporary relief" in the form of small cash payments or necessities like fuel and food. Poor relief administrators all over the state were entangled in a mushrooming number of legal suits as towns sued one another for the relief or deportation costs of non-resident relief recipients. The Yates Report argued for the abolition for such practices which wasted more money than was spent on the provisioning of the poor. Yates recommended that relief be distributed on the county level to preclude disputes between towns. Relief applicants would be provisioned by the county in which they applied. Just as

⁶ See Stansell, "Precarious Dependencies: Women in the Republican City, 1789-1820," *City of Women*, pp.4 – 37, *passim*; and Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁷ Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1996), p. 138.

significantly, Yates recommended establishing "indoor" relief in county poorhouses. He argued that providing for the poor on a collective scale would serve them more cheaply. Outdoor or temporary relief would continue; its purpose was to assist those paupers whose physical condition prevented their removal from their homes.⁸ Thirteen of the 14 Erie Canal counties instituted this system and erected almshouses by 1830.⁹

The Yates report differentiated between the permanent poor, 'or those who are regularly supported, during the whole year, at the public expense,' and the occasional or 'temporary poor...who receive occasional relief, during a part of the year chiefly in the autumn or winter.'" Politicians and the public preferred relieving the poor through "Indoor Relief" at the poorhouse. Temporary relief payments allowed poor people to stay in their own homes and in control of their own lives. In contrast, poorhouse inmates lived in the lowly conditions of the almshouse and under the surveillance and control of poorhouse keepers. Poorhouses were also touted as cheaper than temporary relief - which they were not - and necessary for reforming and punishing paupers.¹⁰

The Western New York Counties welcomed the new system. The Rochester Telegraph lauded the new plan in its distinct treatment of the "worthy" and "unworthy" poor.

It is gratifying that measures are in train for simplifying the plan for supporting the poor, which, while it will administer relief and comfort to the really necessit[ous] will hold out no inducements to the idle and vicious...it will doubtless be the commencement of a system which will be productive of the most salutary effects. We hope the time is not far distant when every county in the state will be benefited by these establishments.¹¹

⁸ Martha Branscombe, *The Courts and the Poor Laws in New York State, 1784-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), pp. 26-36.

⁹ "Statistics of County Poor Houses," New York State: 1865 Census, p. 572.

¹⁰ Katz, p.32.

¹¹ *Rochester Telegraph*, January 4, 1825. Monroe County was exempted from the bill but commented as above.

The poverty relief system reform fit in the wider framework of the Second Great Awakening and the moral reform activism it inspired. With Calvinist roots wedded to perfectionist and democratic ideals, the Second Great Awakening popularized among the native-born, Protestant, emergent middle class a relatively new ideology of poverty.¹² According to this ideology, the poor were lazy and idle, and impoverishment in itself was sinful. This construction of the poor represented a radical ideological break with the past. In Roman Catholic Europe, the poor seemed to comprise a natural segment of the society. As Weber points out, "medieval ethics [had] not only tolerated begging but actually glorified it in the mendicant orders. Even secular beggars, since they gave the person of means opportunity for good works through giving alms, were sometimes considered an estate and treated as such."¹³

The origins of this new ideology of poverty lie in the Protestant concept of "the calling."

The notion of the calling...did not exist either in antiquity or in Catholic theology; it was introduced by the Reformation. It refers basically to the idea that the highest form of moral obligation of the individual is to fulfill his duty in worldly affairs. This projects religious behaviour into the day-to-day world, and stands in contrast to the Catholic ideal of the monastic life, whose object is to transcend the demands of mundane existence."¹⁴

In accordance with "the calling," Puritan theology introduced a new construction of "work." As Weber writes, according to Puritan theology, "unwillingness to work [was]

¹² On the Protestant ideology of poverty, see Maureen Fitzgerald, "Charity, Poverty, and Child Welfare," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 25, No.4 (1996); Paul Slack, *The English Poor Law, 1531-1782*, (Macmillan, 1990); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans., Talcott Parsons (London: HarperCollins Academic, 1991).

¹³ Weber, p. 177.

¹⁴ Anthony Giddens, Introduction to Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 21st ed., trans. Talcott Parsons (London: HarperCollins Academic, 1991), p. xii.

symptomatic of the lack of grace."¹⁵ Work and lack of work or impoverishment had taken on a new, religious meaning.

By the 1820s, Katz writes that

none of the critics of poor relief...proposed to eliminate poverty. To most people of the time, the idea would have been preposterous. Even in America, the vast majority would have to scabble hard for a living. Nor was the issue redistribution of wealth; rather, it was this: how to keep the genuinely needy from starving without breeding a class of paupers who chose to live off public and private bounty rather than to work.¹⁶

As scholars have made clear, middle class formation was inextricably bound with evangelical Protestantism. As Paul Johnson writes,

Finney's revival was strongest among entrepreneurs who bore direct responsibility for disordered relations between classes...The problem of social class arose in towns and cities all over the northern United States after 1820.¹⁷

Against this complex background of Protestant revivalism, moral reform and an ideological reconstruction of poverty among the emergent middle class, Mrs. Edna Deane Smith, a doctor's wife, a Quaker and the daughter of a Revolutionary War captain migrated to Lockport, New York, from her native New England. As in Buffalo to the southwest, and Rochester and Utica to the east, Lockport in the early 1820s was rapidly populated by the emerging middle and working-classes. In 1821, the twenty-six year-old Smith arrived there, just before an army of laboring men began digging the Niagara County section of the Erie Canal. The Smiths were part of a wave of native-born, middle-class settlers, including land speculators, professionals, merchants and master craftsmen and their wives and children from other New York counties and New England.

¹⁵ Weber p.159.

¹⁶ Katz, p.18.

¹⁷ Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p.106.

As had happened at other points on the incomplete canal, these middle-class immigrants followed anticipated opportunities to be brought by canal laborers and traffic.¹⁸

"Among the many hundreds congregated to work on the canal," Smith remembered late in her life, "there was, of course, something of a variety in the way of intelligence and manners, some who had seen better days, who by misfortune, had come at last into the position of common laborers."¹⁹ According to Smith's memoirs, the "common laborers" were "the Irish element [that] largely predominated" among the canal diggers, while "those who had seen better days" had experienced downward mobility in the new industrial economy.²⁰

Smith equated "common laborer" with Irishness and characterized the work force as defined by "the hot blood of that nation."²¹ The laborers needed "all the force and vigilance at command to prevent wild work now and then." "The inhabitants," she said, "were always alarmed" when mobs and riots broke out among the laborers because they did not know "when the spirit of mischief would end, when once loosed from restraints." She also believed that the Irish had low standards of cleanliness. She remembered that the Irish kept "pig styes or cowhouses," adding that there was nothing to "prevent [the Irish from] being as dirty as they chose." She also characterized the laborers as irresponsible when she observed that the men tended to be "careless" and "reckless" in the use of blasting powder.

This description of Lockport's "common laborers" contrasted with her description of a poor downwardly-mobile married couple. Smith met the wife after her husband asked her to attend to a particular "case of suffering." Smith arrived at "a shanty of the poorest description" where she "found on [a] miserable pallet...a young, beautiful,

¹⁸ "A Romantic Fact," *Recollections of Aunt Edna*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ "Some Characteristics of the Canal Laborers," *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

refined English woman with her first-born infant in her arms, no one in attendance, altogether in about as forlorn a condition as one can well imagine. Upon questioning her," Smith remembered

[the woman] poured forth the old and not uncommon story of love opposed by 'cruel parents' on her side ending in an elopement, and emigration to Canada. Then the money they brought with them was soon expended in vain search for employment. Hearing that public works were in progress [across the border]...the poor young things drifted over here, the same ill luck followed them and finally with starvation staring them in the face, [her husband] went to work as a common laborer on the canal.

Smith described the husband as " an Irish gentleman, uncommonly fine looking with a noble, frank face."

Just about the time I became acquainted with them," Smith continued,

the contractor, in paying the men noticed the extreme delicacy of [the husband's] hands, that were blistered and bleeding from the unusual handling of the shovel. When called upon to sign the receipt...he took the pen and made his mark. The contractor looked at him a moment and said 'a man with such a face and such hands can write his name I know.' With a flush of shame, he wrote his name in a most graceful and beautiful manner. He had him stand [to] one side until he was at leisure and finding him as he did, intelligent, well educated and an excellent book-keeper, engaged him at once with a liberal salary.

He was industrious and faithful and retained his situation until the works were completed, when he went into business with a gentleman of high standing in a neighboring city, where he succeeded admirably and in time became one of the most prosperous and respected citizens, was elected Mayor and filled many responsible offices with ability.

Some years after he left us, I...met him...on his way home from England, where he had been to receive a fortune left to his wife by her father, who had become reconciled to them before his death. He was a noble man and never forgot his old friends and remembered enough of his old sorrows, to have his hand and heart always open to the wants and sorrows of others. The romance can be ended like that of the old story books, 'And they lived happily ever after.'²²

Smith's account indicated her view that the husband's access to professional and capital networks was shaped by the justice of the new order, a meritocracy that would

²² "A Romantic Fact," Ibid.

reward those men of good character who worked hard. Smith's faith in this new order was indicated by the couple's appearance. The wife was "a refined English woman" while the husband was "an Irish gentleman, uncommonly fine looking with a noble, frank face."²³ He was immediately recognizable as out of place among common laborers. The contractor, too, recognized him as inherently superior to the canal diggers, concluding that a man with such a face did not belong among the laborers. In this way, Smith differentiated the couple from the laboring class in Lockport. Moreover, the "Irish gentlemen" embodied the ideal attributes of middle-class masculinity, "he was industrious and faithful" and "he succeeded admirably and in time became one of the most prosperous and respected citizens." As a true republican citizen, he went on to hold public office. Ultimately, the husband and wife were absorbed into the middle-class community of Lockport, where he was given access to upward mobility.

Another early Lockport resident, Mrs. M.J. Emory, remembered the story of a different immigrant couple. While the details of Emory's life are lost, it is clear that she was native-born, at least from a middling background and most likely hailed from New England like Lockport's other early settlers. "In the year 1824," Emory recalled late in her life,

two brothers came to Lockport from Ireland, one bringing with him his young bride who left home, friends and her Green Island home to commence their new life in the then unsettled wilderness of our city. The two brothers were employed in excavating and blasting rocks... The brothers were talking of their thankfulness at being delivered from the tyranny of the old country and the blessing it was to be in America, where they could worship God according to their own conscience...when [a] box of stone fell on the brothers, instantly killing the unmarried one and fatally injuring the other. The young wife was sent for. When by the side of her dying husband he said, "Mary I am going home; my brother has gone before me; would you rather stay in this country or go back to Ireland?" She said, "I want to go [to] my mother." He said, "Good-by till we meet in heaven," and passed peacefully from this life. That day, brother

²³ Ibid.

workmen raised \$300 for the young wife and buried the brothers... The young wife, in due time, went to Ireland.²⁴

Women like the widow in Emory's memory were probably not unusual. Though relatively well paid, jobs building the Erie Canal provided a dangerous and also unsteady livelihood. Edna Smith remembered, for example, that "many a poor fellow was blown into fragments" in blasting accidents on this section of the canal. "On some days the list of killed and wounded would be almost like that of a battle field," she recalled.²⁵ In addition, work on the Erie Canal, according to Carol Sheriff, was not only seasonal but "any particular job on the canal endured for but a short period of time, sending workers from job to job, with the uncertainty of when and where they would next find work."²⁶ The combination of unsteady pay and a high chance of injury or death put any women dependent on such men at risk as well.

Like the "refined English woman" that Smith recalled, the Irish wife was dependent on the class position of her husband. Both women were impoverished as a result of their husband's inadequate pay or unemployment. But, while the English woman was absorbed into the dominant community through the help of "kind neighbors" (and, literally, moved out of her shanty) and her husband's business connections, the second woman, was left outside of the dominant community. The storyteller, Mrs. Emory, observes that the woman was helped by the laborers.

In 1824, the Buffalo Emporium printed a lengthy appeal on behalf of the immigrant poor titled "The Irish Emigrant" that explained why many Irish immigrant widows were poor and argued that they were worthy of middle-class charity. The piece describes the oppressive life of a small Irish farmer "born in the country of affliction."

²⁴ "Early Days in Lockport," Letter to the Editor dated October 26, 1896, *Lockport Daily Journal*, included in "Erie Canal Labor."

²⁵ "The Dangers of Blasting," *Recollections of Aunt Edna*.

²⁶ Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (Hill and Wang, 1996) p. 45.

Finally, the farmer emigrated, bringing his wife, children and elderly father to the United States, but the farmer died before arriving, leaving his family without their paternal caretaker and breadwinner. At the close of the story, the writer, William Sampson, Esq., asks

Where shall his wife now wander, when maddened with despair? Where shall his father lay his wearied bones? Where shall his innocent babes find food, unless the ravens feed them? Oh hard and cruel man! Oh worse than hellish fiends! May not the poor find pity? What's he that now reviles them?...Sons of Columbia! Will you profane the bounteous gift of nature, in flattering the mighty and the great, and withhold a nobler aid to the cause of the poor and afflicted?

Sampson's impassioned appeal suggests that there were many Irish dependents - widows, children and elderly parents - in the Erie Canal region but little sympathy for them from the wider, native-born community.²⁷

Another early 1820s fictional story in the Emporium, too, reflects a mixture of sympathy, fascination and distance from poor, Irish immigrants. In "An Irish Cabin," an unidentified middle-class man follows a poor Irish boy whose "health and intelligence" could not be obscured by "dirt and rags." The man gives the boy a small gift and follows him home. As in Smith's memory, the story teller is fascinated by the living conditions of a poor family, and describes the small size, the family bed and the filth of the cabin. The Irish father, though wearing tattered clothing, had "a manly, commanding countenance" and was "well-proportioned and athletic" but was "a gigantic, bareheaded creature." The children had "rosy countenances...in spite of filth and ragged garments." They were clustered around the mother while she worked at her domestic tasks.²⁸

The writer sympathized with the mother's plight in noting that she appeared ill. However, her victimization was also eroticized when he says that "the dress of the poor

²⁷ "The Irish Emigrant," *Buffalo Emporium & General Advertiser*, November 18, 1824.

²⁸ "An Irish Cabin," *Ibid.*, January 22, 1825, p.1.

woman was barely sufficient to satisfy decency." He had the opportunity to set his gaze more fully upon her when he left "the deplorable habitation and she followed him "to repeat her thanks for the trifle [he] had bestowed." "This gave me an opportunity of observing her person more particularly," he explained. "She was a tall figure; her countenance composed of interesting features, and with every appearance of once having been handsome." The observer's involvement with the poor family finally ends after inspecting their private space and the woman's body. There, the newspaper reader's experience with the poor Irish family ends.

"An Irish Cabin" reflects mixed feelings about the poor family. The family seem to have been in some ways familiar, if not acceptable to the middle class. The boy is "healthy and intelligent," the mother had once "been handsome" and the children had "rosy countenances." At the same time, the narrator describes the husband as a "creature." And, as in Emory's account of the widowed Irish woman, the author does not really get involved with the needy subjects of the story. He is sympathetic to them but does not take measures to help them with the exception of bestowing a small gift on the boy as a way of gaining entry to the "Irish Cabin."

In an 1823 depiction of the poor in a story titled "Do Likewise" in the Black Rock Beacon, a native-born poor man is treated differently than the Irish family above.²⁹

An interesting but care worn [mendicant] in vacant mood of mind entered the store of a wealthy merchant in this city and he paced along his eye rested upon an unusual quantity of gold and silver coin which the clerks were busied in counting. His heart sunk within him as he felt the chill of November which reminded him of the poverty of his lot and the misery of his family and turning away in despair, he ejaculated to himself, how happy some of that money would make me! `What is that you say my friend?' interrogated the merchant. The confused mendicant begged to be excused; he was not conscious of uttering any thing at the moment; at any rate his thought was not meant for his ear. But the kind hearted merchant would not take no for an answer and the poor man repeated what before had involuntarily broke from his lips. `And how much my dear fellow, would it take to make you happy? O, I don't know? [sic] The winter is

²⁹ Black Rock is a township on the Erie Canal north of Buffalo.

approaching and I have no wood, my wife and children are but poorly clad for I have been sick. Our wants are limited however and 15 dollars would dissipate the gloom. John count this man fifteen dollars.” The ingenuous heart can *feel* like the grateful stranger the nobleness of such bounty and exult for human nature that meek eyed charity should find such a kindred abode. At evening the clerk inquired what entry he should make of the money? O! Say, by making a man happy, \$15,” answered the no less eccentric than humane merchant. A ray of heavenly light does occasionally break upon this scene of war, of selfishness and ambitious strife: enough to organize the spirit with despair for the future safety of that numbered host who never feel a glow of charity, & whose breast are the abodes of `fraud oppression and hypocrisy.’³⁰

The evidently native-born “mendicant” in “Do Likewise” and the “refined, English woman” of Smith’s memory are in two ways similar. First, the story teller gives each a chance to relate the circumstances of his or her poverty. Second, these main characters are given charity. In contrast, the Irish widows in Emory’s memory and Sampson’s “The Irish Emigrant” and the wife in “An Irish Cabin,” are silent and are left unassisted by the native-born, middle-class society. These texts suggest that the native-born society perceived a cultural distance from the poor Irish women that translated into a lack of benevolence toward them.

The texts that focus on women without men concern widows, and, in each case, the narrative is about the men. The reader’s sympathy for the widows is derived from the establishment of the husband’s good character. Yet, none of the texts were about single women or single mothers, suggesting that there was no story to tell with the absence of a husband in the story. The morality of this discursive invisibility of women without men is further suggested by a poem that appeared in the Black Rock Beacon in 1823. More specifically, the poem offers some clues about middle-class ideology concerning single mothers. The piece is prefaced by the explanation that it was “supposed to be addressed by a young lady to her lover.” The poem and a small picture of a “gentleman” were found after her death. “The hapless fair one had become a mother,” the preface

³⁰ “Do Likewise,” *Black Rock Beacon*, November 27, 1823, 3-3.

explains, “but died of a broken spirit shortly after the birth of her child.” The poet describes her illicit love affair that produced a “hapless little one conceived in shame.” In her last request, the woman demands of the child’s father “’tis my will, that he should never know his mother’s name.”³¹ The single-mother character renders herself invisible, erased from her son’s life. In making the single mother a sympathetic figure, the poem seems to herald the rising concerns of women activists that women in the industrial era were sexual prey for male seducers in urban centers.³² Ironically, by making this woman visible, the poem indicated that single mothers existed though they were invisible, either shamefully “erasing” themselves or “erased” by others. The piece points to in part, why the poverty discourse focused on wives and widows only. With the exception of widows, women without men – from the perspective of the middle-class, like the poor Irish wives in the latter texts, did not seem to exist within the bounds of the society.

By the early 1830s, when the poorhouses of the Erie Canal corridor were established, the middle class and poor in the region were already becoming differentiated by native and foreign birth. Middle-class western New Yorkers hailed from a white, native-born, Protestant, New England background while marginal working-class and poor people were native-born and immigrant people. Yet, analysis of middle-class discourse about the poor in the early 1820s suggests that the middle-class perceived these two groups of poor people differently. While the native-born poor were depicted in these texts as familiar and worthy of charity, poor Irish immigrants seemed remote from the charitable reach of the native-born society.

Constructions of poor women that were evident in the poverty discourse of the 1820s continued in the 1830s. In 1834, temperance activist Samuel Chipman of the New

³¹ Ibid., April 10, 1823, 4-1.

³² See Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Beauty, the Beast, and the Militant Woman: Sex Roles and Sexual Standards in Jacksonian America,” in Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *Women, Families, and Communities: Readings in American History, Volume I: To 1877* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman/Little, Brown Higher Education, 1990), pp. 124-138.

York State Temperance Society argued that intemperance caused poverty and crime. Chipman's report is a relatively rich early source of information about industrial poverty and the poor in the counties of the Burned-Over District. While Chipman argued that alcohol producers were at the root of the intemperance problem, he was sure to blame immigrants as largely responsible for perpetrating intemperance. In Chipman's work, which exemplified temperance ideology, "foreign," "poor" and "intemperate" became overlapping categories, as was reflected in his conclusion that one poorhouse keeper's count of intemperate inmates was too low:

I am confident that the keeper was over cautious in his classification. A considerable number of the *temperate* were Canadians - necessarily strangers previous to their admission.³³

Worse, the population of foreign-born poor people was growing. Chipman pointed out that "the increase in the number of foreign poor, at [the Niagara County poorhouse] is worthy of especial notice." Discussing Albany, too, he commented that

the great mass of the foreigners of this city are poor, and...a large proportion of the... expense for the support of the poor of the city and county, goes to the support of individuals of this class...The greatest benefactor to this class of people will be that man who can persuade them to abandon the use of that which thus makes them poor and miserable and degraded.³⁴

Within this framework, Chipman elucidated a gendered solution to poverty. Fitting squarely in the context of the antebellum moral reform movements, he argued that intemperance was the cause of an expanding society of female and juvenile dependents without male breadwinners. The gendered solution to this problem of class was not to empower women but to make reliable, temperate breadwinners out of foreign-born, working-class husbands. The temperance movement aimed to achieve this end by using the legal system to eliminate alcohol production. Chipman argued that intemperance was

³³ Samuel Chipman, "Report of an Examination of Poorhouses, Jails and c., in the State of New York and in the Counties of Berkshire, Massachusetts, Litchfield, Connecticut and Bennington, Vermont, & c., (Albany, 1834), p.23.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.90.

"filling our jails with felons, and our madhouses with maniacs, and our land with widows and orphans."³⁵ Like other temperance reformers, Chipman argued that male drunkenness was a danger to wives and children in the form of physical violence and men's failure to support their families. Here, Chipman argued that intemperance was not only at the root of deviant behavior in the form of crime, and a cause of mental illness, but the cause of an expanding society of dependents without breadwinners. He characterized each of the intemperate male heads of these families as a "loved and cherished protector...transformed to a madman and a brute."³⁶

Moreover, Chipman asserted that

in no poor-house that I have visited have I failed of finding the wife or the widow, and the children of the drunkard. In one poor-house...of 190 persons relieved there the past year, were *nineteen wives of drunken husbands, and seventy-one children of drunken fathers.*³⁷

Chipman's frustration lay with the men who were rejecting their roles as providers.

Concerned with downwardly-mobile families, Chipman argued that each of "the wives and children of this class [could tell] the history of their griefs; of their downward course from affluence or competency--from respectability and domestic happiness to poverty to misery and wretchedness Like Chipman, the superintendent of the Albany Alms-House, George W. Welch, too, focused on downwardly-mobile women. In 1834, Welch reported

of the whole number [of the 634 inmates] 198 were females, and at least three quarters of them were intemperate, and full one half grossly so - There are a very few respectable and interesting women here, but they were reduced to poverty by the intemperance of their husbands.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid., p.77.

³⁶ Ibid., p.76.

³⁷ Ibid., p.6.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

In 1833, the Oneida County Jailer, Horatio Carr, made clear the extreme deviance of intemperate women: "Of the *intemperate* [jail inmates] , *one* was charged with murder; eleven were *females!* and *three* men for abuse of their families." According to Carr, intemperate women were as deviant, if not as criminal, as murderers and men who beat wives and children. According to Welch, the only "respectable and interesting women" in the Albany poorhouse were temperate, married and "reduced to poverty." Such women were neither single nor chronically poor. Not the dependents of men and admittedly intemperate, these single women stood outside the family groups where they were "independent," unlike the married victims of male intemperance.

While Chipman could not always determine if the married women applicants for relief were temperate, in each of the cases of single women applying for assistance that he recorded, poor single women were paired with the immorality of "intemperance." Chipman's report reveals that from the middle-class perspective poor single women existed beyond the bounds of "respectability" in that they were not only intemperate, but did not fill the ideal female role as dependent. In the first case he saw of a single woman applying for relief, he wrote that, "she acknowledges she had been intemperate. " For Chipman, the woman's intemperance at some time explained her destitution. Later that month, "a female asked to be sent to alms-house, she is intemperate." A few days later, "a woman applied to be sent to alms-house, she has been there before, and in jail; is intemperate."³⁹ In each of these cases of single women relief applicants, immorality seemed to have brought them to poverty: "The first applicant was a female. She had lately come from the west; was entirely destitute of money, and almost of clothing; was sent to the alms-house. Acknowledges she had been intemperate."⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 90-91.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.90.

Commenting on the pauper population of one county almshouse, Chipman suggested that temperate poor people tended to "belong to families," as when he reported that

A considerable number of the temperate [there] are persons belonging to families, the fathers of which have left them to be provided for here at the public expense; while they have gone to the west to provide places to which to remove their families in the spring.⁴¹

Here, Chipman explains why "temperate" people would be in the poorhouse. In this case, they used the poorhouse as a strategy for achieving upward mobility. In this way, Chipman differentiated such families from the intemperate poor.

By the mid-1830s, too, this problematization of immigrants was reflected in the relief system. In 1830, the registers of the Erie County Poorhouse indicated that administrators were concerned about inmates' origins insofar as they were "town" or "county" poor. Five years later, the poorhouse keeper tabulated the numbers of "Foreign" inmates and inmates who were "Citizens of the US."⁴²

The Depression of 1837 marked a transition in the poverty discourse with regard to poor people's nativity. Poorhouse data indicate that the birthplace of relief recipients had become more important in distinguishing between the worthy and unworthy poor. While the Erie County Poorhouse Keeper's annual reports in the mid-1830s indicate that immigrants far outnumbered native-born paupers, the reports of the late 1830s indicate that native-born poorhouse inmates were catching up.⁴³ As the numbers of native-born paupers increased, the poverty discourse changed in a way that differentiated between the native and immigrant poor.

From the perspective of native-born Protestant Americans, nativity was becoming an increasingly significant social category. As Dale T. Knobel has argued, in the 1820s

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴² Erie County Almshouse Registers.

⁴³ Ibid., 1835, 1836, 1838 and 1839.

and 1830s, moral reform activists espoused an optimistic view of human character as "plastic and reformable," but, soon, this environmental theory of character began to wane. In his study of native-born perspectives on immigrants, Knobel argues that as native-born white reformers came into increasingly frequent contact with immigrants, they (reformers) developed a pessimistic concept of human character as unredeemable. Largely poor, Catholic and uninterested, if not resistant to temperance campaigns, immigrants seemed inherently "unreformable."⁴⁴

During the depression years, anti-immigrant and anti-Irish Catholic rhetoric increased. In 1837, minister John Chase Lord of Buffalo's First Presbyterian Church explained that only particular immigrants were problematic.

The foreign influence brought to bear upon our institutions by Papeists and Radicals from the old world, is preparing the way for their destruction. No reference is here intended to those emigrants to this county descended from the same ancestry, speaking the same language with ourselves, and educated under a government from which our own was in part modeled. Such men are bound to us by close ties, and are prepared to understand and respect our institutions.⁴⁵

In 1838, according to an article in the Buffalo Daily Star, Irish political participation would "always be viewed as an OFFENCE to American citizens."⁴⁶ And, according to the Troy Whig,

unlike the Swedes the Germans, the Scots, and the English, the Irish when they arrive among us, too IDLE AND VICIOUS to clear and cultivates [sic] land, and earn a comfortable home, DUMP themselves down in our large villages and towns, crowding the meaner sort of tenements and filling them with wretchedness, filth and disease. In a *political* point of view, what are they but mere MARKETABLE CATTLE.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America*, (Scranton, Pennsylvania: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 18.

⁴⁵ John Chase Lord, A.M. "Signs of the Times: Sermon Delivered at the Pearl Street Church, First Presbyterian Church," (Buffalo, 1837) pp. 14-17.

⁴⁶ "Treatment of Foreigners," *Buffalo Daily Star* November 7, 1838, Reprinted from the *Journal of Commerce*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, November, 7, 1838, reprinted from *The Troy Whig*.

During the depression, at least one phrenologist tied physiology to class, and, like other antebellum scientists, provided intellectual support for racial essentialism.

Phrenologists mapped the topography of the human skull, theorizing that bumps on the head indicated the characterological makeup of the individual. In an 1839 lecture in Buffalo, phrenologist Professor Grimes, taught his audience that

some men have the bones and muscles large, while the brains and the nervous system are comparatively small. Such men are more remarkable for their corporeal and animal energies than for their moral and intellectual powers. Of this class of temperament were Ajax and Hercules among the ancients, and such men are most of the laboring classes of the community at this day.⁴⁸

Grimes also lent scientific credence to notions of inherent right to political leadership. In this example, he used the white, Protestant and wealthy slave-owning, leading citizen George Washington, to "prove" phrenological principles. The "socials," Grimes, explained, were the areas of the brain that are the seat of those organs which establish society - those which govern it - , and those which conform to it." To illustrate his point, Grimes "exhibited a bust of Washington, and pointed out the full development of the social governing propensities."⁴⁹

In the same year, the Buffalo Daily Republican differentiated among immigrants by labeling Germans as good potential citizens. In an article on the "Steuben Guards' Ball," the Republican reported that

The Ball...was made up of our most respectable citizens,...American and German...This commingling of Americans and Germans must have a good effect. Not many years must elapse, before these, or their children, will form an important portion of the wealth, the intelligence, and the fashion of our city. No device of aristocratic or clannish schemers, can avert that day. They are making rapid progress in wealth, in public spirit, and in all those accomplishments which belong to the qualifications of good American citizens.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ "Prof. Grimes First Lecture on Phrenology - Concluded," *Buffalo Daily Republican*, February, 6, 1839, 2-3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8 February, 8, 1839, 1-3.

⁵⁰ "Steuben Guards' Ball," *Ibid.*, February 13, 1839, 2-1.

According to the Republican, immigrants who were not making progress in wealth did not qualify as "good American citizens."

Native-born Americans did not view all immigrant groups the same way. Specifically, they perceived German and Irish immigrants differently. German immigrants were neither as poor nor as unskilled as the Irish. In contrast to the Irish, many Germans arrived in the U.S. with craft training or enough capital to buy land.⁵¹ As Knobel has pointed out, the German stereotype - industrious, stable and persistent - had much in common with Americans' self-image. Anglo-Americans "were willing to acknowledge a special relationship" with Germans because they perceived them as "ethnic kin." "Germans... compared to the Irish,...received remarkably gentle treatment in the language of American common culture."⁵² Though Poor Department reports never singled out the Irish for special blame in the poverty problem, annual accounting of ethnic and racial groups among the poor made it evident that the Irish comprised the largest segment of the poor population. Knobel, too, found "few immediate references to the economic condition of the Irish in popular discourse" even while vagrant Irish drained the public purse."⁵³

This specific focus on the Irish emerged in the context of the Depression of 1837, when many Americans could not "earn a comfortable home," to borrow a phrase from the Troy Whig.⁵⁴ The cultural differences between native-born Americans and non-Irish immigrants on the one hand and Irish immigrants on the other hand pointed to distinctions between the downwardly mobile poor and the chronically poor Irish. In other

⁵¹ David A. Gerber, *The Making of an American Pluralism Buffalo, New York, 1825-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 176-187.

⁵²Knobel, p. 98.

⁵³Knobel, p. 29.

⁵⁴ "Treatment of Foreigners." *Buffalo Daily Star* 7 November, 7, 1838, reprinted from *The Troy Whig*.

words, in a context of widespread impoverishment, such distinctions among the poor maintained the validity of evaluating some as “worthy” poor and others as “unworthy.”

During the late 1830s, constructions of gender, too, seem to have affirmed the worthiness of the depression-era poor. An 1838 article in the Buffalo Daily Star, “Evils of Poverty,” described poor men as vulnerable soldiers. The piece argued that “the poverty of the poor man is the least part of his misery.”

In all the storms of fortune, he is the first that must stand the shock of extremity. Poor men are perpetual sentinels, watching, in the depths of night, against the incessant assaults of want, while the rich lie stored in secure repose, and compassed with large abundance. If the land be visited with a bloodless famine, are not the poor the first that sacrifice their life to hunger? If war thunders in the trembling county's lap, are not the poor those that are exposed to the enemy's sword and outrage? If the plague, like a loaded sponge, flies sprinkling poison through a whole kingdom, the poor are the fruit that are shaken from the burthened tree: while the rich, furnished with the helps of fortune, have means to wind out themselves, and turn those sad endurances on the poor that cannot avoid them. Like salt marshes, that lie low, they are sure, whenever the sea of this world rages, to be the first under and embarrassed with a fretting care. Who, like he poor, are harrowed with oppression, ever subject to the imperious taxes and gripes of mightiness? Continual care checks the spirit continual labor checks the body, and continual, insultation -- both. The poor man is like one rolled in a vessel full of spikes, which way soever he turns he something finds that pricks him.⁵⁵

Unlike the depiction of foreign-born men in the earlier intemperance literature, the “Evils of Poverty” described poor men as vulnerable soldiers, necessarily those who retained their manhood in poverty. The piece depicted depression-era poor men not as the cause of a deviant society of poor wives and children without breadwinners, but as poor victims themselves.

At the same time, the image of women in the poverty discourse remained the same as it had been before the depression, though moreso in the character of the poor widow. The hint of a sudden outpouring of appeals on behalf of poor widows suggested that while many widows seemed to have been subsisting, if not comfortable, before the

⁵⁵ “Evils of Poverty,” *Ibid.*, July 4, 1838, p.2-1.

depression, they were downwardly mobile during the depression. But the issue of temperance seems to have dropped out of the discussion, suggesting that the women had been married to men of at least adequate means. For these women, downward mobility translated into entitlement to help. As the depression went on into the winter of 1839, the Daily Republican implored its readers, "Let no man hold back in [donating charity] -- remember that we have had a very severe winter; remember the Widow and the Fatherless."⁵⁶ The appeal suggested an expectation or recognition that widows and orphans would be poor and that the public should help them. In another reminder to the more fortunate about the poor, the Republican said that "A few..donations would carry comfort and happiness into the bosom of many families who are now in the cold dependency of want and prospective famine."⁵⁷ If these requests were not focused on widows and children specifically, this one demonstrates that they were, at least, focused on family groups, not single men and women or the poor in general.

An 1838 article in the Buffalo Daily Star may suggest that the discussion of poor widows had become more commonplace because although widows were entitled to help, they were not getting enough of it. According to this article, men should provide for other women and children as well as their own, though within certain limits. This "short and true story" depicted "an excellent young lady" who [was] wealthy, beautiful, [and] accomplished" who chose among her suitors by conducting a "Test of Benevolence." The "young lady"

had come across a poor widow with a family in distress in one of her benevolent excursio[ns], and the idea occurred to her that it would be a good opportunity to ascertain the stuff her lover's heart was made of. Letters were forthwith indited [sic] setting forth the good woman's tale, and forwarded to the different gentlemen in the widow's name, requesting an answer and assistance.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ "The Suffering Poor," *Buffalo Daily Republican*, February 7, 1839 p.2-2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, February 8, 1839, 2-1.

⁵⁸ "The Test of Benevolence," *Buffalo Daily Star*, July 26, 1838.

The suitors' reactions to the request for charity would reveal their moral worthiness. As the middle-class woman who constructed the "test" was actually more interested in her own search for a husband than in the widow, the story was primarily about what makes a good, middle-class husband. Thus, the widow became a litmus test: a man who could properly recognize and properly help the worthy poor was worthy himself.

The men's reactions to the "test of benevolence" varied. The first suitor replied with "a lecture on idleness and begging, and concluded with the information that the writer was not accustomed to give to those he did not know. This was from \$10,000 a year!" The second suitor suggested that the widow apply to the benevolent societies for help. "This was from one who had a great reputation for benevolence." The third reply was "from a good-hearted and generous kind of a fellow [who] enclosed her a \$5 bill with his compliments." Finally, a reply from one who made but \$100 a year "spoke of the writer's narrow means, and also of the principles he adopted, of never giving, unless persuaded of the worthiness of the object, and concluded by requesting an interview." He said that if he could not afford to help the widow that he would speak on her behalf to friends who could. A few weeks later, "the widow found herself comfortably located and engaged in a thriving little business." The help from one who made "but \$100 a year" affirmed that from the middle-class perspective, widows should be helped but only in ways that utilized suspicion in evaluating the poor and by dispensing relief that resulted in the independence of the poor.

While in the past, the widow would either have remarried or become a dependent in another household, in this case, she took on the male guise of independency, thus reserving the suitor's resources for the lady alone. This relationship between the suitor and the widow forms the erotic subtext of the story: the suitor's willingness to help the widow and his method of providing charity inspired in the lady "some thing very much like a palpitation of the heart," and the lady accepted his marriage proposal, concluding

that "the friend of the fatherless and widow cannot fail to make *a constant lover and a worthy husband*."⁵⁹ While the suitor's charity is sexualized for the lady, so is his suspicion of poor women. His refusal to perform a husband-like duty in providing financial support to the widow fits in the story's erotic framework. The suitor's intercourse with the widow takes place within the cash nexus, as he helps to provide her with money (but none of his own) that would reproduce itself through the transactions of a "thriving little business." The potential husband's earnings and support were reserved for the lady while the widow was masculinized by her step out of domesticity and into the world of business. This relationship between the suitor and the widow, and all under the gaze of the lady, reflected the privatization of the middle-class family, marriage and sexuality, as well as it pointed to a dissolution of ties between independent men and the women of the community.

One middle-class solution to the problem of poverty in the late 1830s was to reform the children of poor Catholic parents. From its establishment, most of the children housed at the Asylum had foreign-born parents. By 1838, the Buffalo Orphan Asylum housed 105 children, 89 percent of whom (89% of 105 = 93) had immigrant parents.⁶⁰ That the Asylum organization saw itself as the savior of Catholic children, especially, was clear in this comment in their 1838 annual report:

Where has the very highest civilization and refinement, unbaptized by the benevolence of Jehovah himself, laid the foundation of a single establishment, for the physical relief and the intellectual and moral advancement of the bereaved and the destitute? Casting ourselves, in imagination, out of the pale of Christianity, for a moment, let us spurn at once all inferior conditions of unevangelized man, and pass up the streets of Rome - proud imperial Rome, when in the zenith of her glory...[and see] monuments of pride...There is not one of mercy in the whole array. Here are places in abundance to make widows and orphans; but there is not a solitary hospital for the wounded gladiator or soldier, or for the impoverished sick; not one school for the ignorant poor; not one Asylum

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ "Report of the Trustees and Managers of the Society Established in the city of Buffalo for the Relief of Orphan and Destitute Children" (Buffalo, 1838), p. 10.

for the down-trodden of any age or condition, amid all their piles of architectural magnificence. Wandering among them we behold the forlorn, ignorant, debased and diseased, presenting a scene of moral ruin of which the surrounding grandeur and elegance seems little better than solemn mockery.⁶¹

The Asylum aimed to reform its poor children in the image of the native-born, Protestant middle-class.

As descendants of POOR parents, *they all* have not enjoyed facilities for the acquisition of a taste for intellectual effort. As the progeny of VICIOUS parents, *very many* of them have imbibed a distinct disrelish for any effort of mind whatsoever; having been trained to prefer indolence, sport, and sensuality to activity, employments, mental expansion and moral purity. The Instructress...has employed a naturally excellent judgment, in the selection of such principles of morality and piety as were calculated, at the same time that they discipline the mind, to impress the judgment, and sway the heart to the choice and love of truth and honesty, industry and sobriety, amiability and piety; thus exerting, on the whole, the most desirable influence upon them,.....They are kept without intermission, in a literary and moral atmosphere. Having constant intercourse with their Instructors, guarded vigilantly during hours of intermission and relaxation from dissipating influences.⁶²

From the perspective of the white, native-born, Protestant, middle-class, by the 1840s, immigrants constituted the ascendant cause of poverty in the poverty discourse. Their solution was to assimilate the foreigners. On July 4, 1842, Frederick Whittlesey, a prominent citizen of Rochester gave a speech arguing that

The number of foreigners who have availed themselves of the benign and liberal provisions of our laws, is very considerable...All these strangers, so different in habits, language and prejudices, must be made *Americans*..."

Whittlesey argued that foreigners needed to be "Americanized."⁶³

"There must be a moral training, as well as intellectual culture. The heart must be improved, as well as the head informed; and the substantial virtues must be nourished to grow and blossom and bear fruit in this great field of human hopes. Industry, frugality, prudence, courage,

⁶¹ Ibid., p.8

⁶² Ibid., p. 15

⁶³ Frederick Whittlesey, "An Address Delivered in Washington Square" (Rochester, July 4, 1842).

justice, obedience to law, and love of order were among the virtues which stamped the character of our emigrant fathers, and enabled them to lay broad and deep the foundations of the great edifice of our liberty."⁶⁴

Whittlesey argued that immigrants needed to learn the character attributes associated with Protestant middle-class formation.

After the depression, in the early 1840s, the racialization of the poverty discourse continued. In 1842, Peter Wild, a recent English immigrant in the farming town of Hamburg about ten miles outside Buffalo, drew distinctions among non-Anglo immigrants in a letter to his family in England.

...There are a many come here that never knew what a hard day work was in their lives, that have no other thought but that if they get here all will be stright [sic] forward find themselves sadly deceived and do neither but grumble growl curse the yankeys and get back again as soon as they came when the fault of it is their own, it cannot be expected that a man can get full wages forward that he has neve[r] been used to or be kept, in a strange cuntry [sic] for doing nothing...There are many people out of employ in Buffalo it is swarming with german Duch and Irish there [is as] many as one hundred Irish in the work house at one time...the Duch...live of [sic] anything work at anything or any price until they can get away or better their circumstances, it is a hard place wh[ere] a Duch man cannot live.⁶⁵

When Wild wrote the letter in 1842, Buffalo did not have a "workhouse;" a relief institution in his native England; he was referring to the Erie County Almshouse. Able to identify culturally with Anglo-Americans, Wild characterized both groups of "foreigners" as a sort of invasion of insects when he wrote that "Buffalo is swarming with german Duch and Irish," but he was quick to distinguish the two immigrant populations. According to Wild, Germans were hard working and persistent, while the Irish had a chronic presence in the almshouse, the result of laziness and unrealistic expectations of wealth.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Peter Wild to unnamed recipient, October 1842, Accession 2378, Ref: DD178, Twenty Letters from a Tenant Farmer of Foxholes Farm, Hyde after Emigration to North America, 1842-1866, Tameside Local Studies Library, Stalybridge, Cheshire, United Kingdom.

As the poverty discourse in general became increasingly focused on immigrants, the Erie County Almshouse Registers reflected a growing drive to distinguish between the able-bodied and physically or mentally disabled poor. The registers consisted of printed pages showing columns in which the poorhouse keeper could record the requisite data about each person admitted. Like a sort of text, the columns pointed to the concerns and expectations that relief system officials had of relief recipients. In poor department year 1842/43, the "vagrant/pauper" column on the poorhouse registers expanded to include "lunaticks" and "idiots," indicating that mental illness was becoming a category of inmate unto itself. In the same year, the poorhouse keeper indicated for the first time which paupers were ill. Thus, by the early 1840s, sane, able-bodied paupers were distinguishable from other paupers in the poorhouse records.⁶⁶

Beginning in 1841, the Erie County Poor Department began to evaluate paupers morally by using "intemperance" as a diagnosis for the poverty of physically and mentally healthy inmates. That the association between poverty and intemperance - or moral failure - was changing in the early 1840s was indicated by the way that the poorhouse keeper squeezed in on the register sheet a makeshift column for "intemperance." This ad hoc column was crowded into the "Places of Nativity" column, thus providing a strong visual association between intemperance and place of origin. Occasionally, the term was paired as in "intemperate parents" and "intemperate pauper." Not long into the year, "intemperance" appeared as a loosely scrawled "int," in the registers, suggesting the default social conflation of poverty with alcohol use.

No doubt responding to the arrival of the famine-era Irish, by 1846, the Erie County Board of Supervisors was clear in its anxiety about the foreign-born poor:

The whole number resident at the poorhouse may be distributed into the following classes viz: Those brought to pauperism by the direct influence of intemperance numbering 666, by other causes

⁶⁶ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

64 so that it appears that more than nine tenths of the pauperism of this county for which provision is made out of the public funds is to be attributed to intemperance - one hundred and eighty seven of the whole number of persons resident at your poorhouse during the present year were native born citizens; and five hundred and forty three were foreigners: this showing that three fourths of the paupers of this county are of foreign birth: and [sic] the proportion of foreigners who have received temporary relief from the poor fund of this county is still greater.⁶⁷

Evidence from the same period suggests that the gender and nativity of poorhouse inmates influenced relief administrators' assessments of individual cases of poverty. Between 1841 and 1843, six individuals had the term "misfortune" listed as the cause of their commitment to the poorhouse. Beginning with the reorganization of New York's poverty relief system in the mid-1820s, poorhouses were supposed to house those brought to poverty by sickness or misfortune. The six cases of "misfortune" included five women and one man. Some were at the poorhouse for long stretches of several years. The women were mostly young and native-born while the man was 67-years old and an English immigrant. These cases indicate that "misfortune" labeled chronic cases of dependency, not those who relied on the relief system relatively briefly. Too, these cases suggest that the pauperism of young native-born women were most likely to receive this label. The term was not used again in the Erie County Almshouse except for one instance in the 1850s.⁶⁸ "Misfortune" seems no longer to have shaped poor people's lives.

While the explanations for poverty "misfortune" and "intemperance" emerged at the same time, only "intemperance" lasted. In 1842/43, inmate number 288 was an exception among Erie County Almshouse paupers. Unlike almost all of the other able-bodied paupers there that year, the 43-year old Irishman was listed as "temperate." A

⁶⁷ Proceedings Of The Annual Meetings Of The Erie County Board Of Supervisors., October 16, 1846, 9:00.

⁶⁸ After these six cases of misfortune between 1841 and 1842, only one more case appeared through 1860. In 1854/55, a 50-year old insane pauper woman named Mrs. Woods was admitted to the poorhouse by reason of misfortune, Erie County Almshouse Registers.

puzzle to the poorhouse keeper, he was neither "intemperate" nor a victim of "misfortune." His age, sex and nativity made it unlikely that he would be included in the category "misfortune" and he was an anomaly as temperate and poor. Yet while his pauperism went unexplained, the exception of the label "temperate" helped confirm the native-born, middle-class association between intemperance, poverty and foreign birth.

By the late 1840s, the Superintendents of the Erie County Poorhouse reported "an alarming increase of pauperism" and a precipitous rise in poorhouse expenses over the previous year. They attributed these increases to immigrants.

Of those relieved at the Poor House 204 were native born and 774 were foreigners. Of those relieved in the City of Buffalo a much larger proportion were foreigners...From June 1st to Oct 1st there were one hundred and seventeen cases of ship fever treated at the Poor House Hospital.....The prevalence of famine and disease on the other side of the Atlantic has thrown thousands of poor wretched diseased beings upon our shores to be provided for by public or private charity to the responsibility and expense of which our peculiar location exposes us to our full share...It is believed the causes of the greatly increased demand upon the department are temporary in their nature, and that some relief to the Poor House will result from the completion and occupancy of the Work House.⁶⁹

By 1848, poor department expenses had "accumulated to [an] extraordinary sum." The Committee on the accounts of the Supervisors of the Poor and Poor Department of Erie County reported that

this increase of expenses consist...almost entirely in appropriations for Temporary Relief of the poor of the City of Buffalo...and has arisen mainly in the increase of foreign paupers who have during the past year, been found congregated in that city - the number of paupers relieved in said city exceeds that of last year over two thousand.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Proceedings Of The Annual Meetings Of The Erie County Board Of Supervisors., October 13, 1847

⁷⁰ Ibid., October 20, 1848, 9 a.m.

In 1849, the Rochester Daily Democrat reflected increasing anxiety about the foreign-born and also African-American poor. The Democrat printed "a list of applicants for assistance at the office of the overseer of the poor on Wednesday last."

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 61 families Irish containing 188 persons | |
| 49 do German do | 169 do |
| 19 American | 55 |
| 11 English | 27 |
| 2 French | 12 |
| 4 Negro | 7 |
| <hr/> 146 | <hr/> 458 |

The Democrat argued that

these families receive about \$1 per week, so that while native born citizens receive \$23, foreigners receive \$123; and yet there are individuals who are in favor of the repeal of the law in relation to emigrants from Canada, that we may continue to be flooded by foreign paupers and for the support of whom the county is to be taxed. If any person doubts the above, let him spend an hour from 9 to 10 this morning at the overseer's office.⁷¹

In 1849, too, Erie County officials seem to have become especially concerned about the numbers of foreigners on relief rolls. A committee reviewing the accounts of the Erie County Superintendents of the Poor stated in their 1849 report that their "attention [was] arrested by noticing" the steep increase in poorhouse expenses over the previous four years;" poorhouse expenditures had doubled from 1846 to 1849. But the committee was not especially disturbed by this fact. "It will be perceived," the Superintendents reported, "that the expenditure at the poorhouse proper increased about in the ratio of the probable increase of inhabitants in our county." The committee was much more concerned with the increase in expenditures on immigrants who dominated outdoor and indoor relief rolls. The increase among foreign-born temporary relief recipients was "extraordinary and alarming" while "about eight tenths of those supported

⁷¹ "Relief of the Poor," Rochester Daily Democrat, January 24, 1849, 2-2.

or relieved at the poorhouse are Foreigners," the committee reported, "and it is believed that a still larger proportion of those who obtain temporary relief are of the same class." ⁷²

The late 1840s, too, marked a transition in the poverty discourse with regard to native-born paupers. Before 1849, a poorhouse keeper would record a native-born inmate's place of birth as "Maryland" or "New York." An infant born at the poorhouse would have "B. at P.House" scribbled in the "Nativity" column of the register page. But by early 1850, Erie County Almshouse Keepers stopped recording the place of birth of African-American inmates, and began writing "Colored" in the nativity column. Late that year, they were recording the nativity of native-born, white inmates as "American," and not by state of birth. Concurrently, the nativity of American Indian pauper inmates appeared as "Indian" or "Squaw" rather than by place of birth, as they had appeared in the 1830s.⁷³ These labels indicated an emergent white, American identity by the late antebellum era, formed in opposition to immigrants, American Indians and African-Americans.

Unlike the earlier discourse imploring the more fortunate to "remember the Widow and Fatherless," in 1849, an article in the Buffalo Commercial Advertiser & Journal focused on marginal working-class women, those who made only "a few shillings for washing or sewing." The article called for "Protection for Married Women" from husbands who made them poor.

There is a kind of protection much needed by a certain class of married women, which the philanthropy of legislature has somehow overlooked. We mean that which is required by unfortunate wives, with dissipated husbands whose earnings are

⁷² Proceedings Of The Annual Meetings Of The Erie County Board Of Supervisors., "Report of the Committee on the Accounts of Supervisors of Poor and Poor Department," Wednesday, October 24, 1849, 2p.m., pp. 120-121.

⁷³ In the spring of 1834, for example, 25-year old Sally Oneida, a Native-American woman born in Oneida County, was admitted to the Erie County poorhouse and identified as "Squaw," while the record of 17-year old Jane Dawken, a white woman born in the same county, included no racial category, Erie County Almshouse Registers.

habitually taken from them by their legal masters to minister to their depraved appetites. It is hard indeed for a poor woman who has earned a few shillings for washing or sewing to see herself and her children robbed by a drunken husband. Is there no "protection" for such? There are multitudes of them to be found in every city in the land.⁷⁴

"Protection to Married Women" suggested that working-class women might take a place beside downwardly-mobile women in the poverty discourse. These women were not the downwardly-mobile wives who were the objects of Chipman's temperance crusade. If not an entirely new "class of married women," these wives and families had become more visible. The writer argued not for the restoration of wives' dependency on husbands, as Chipman had, but for the "protection of women" as workers entitled to their own wages.

In the same year, a story appeared in the Commercial Advertiser titled "The Irish Mother" that shared the focus on poor working-class women, while for the first time reflecting native-born, middle-class constructions of Irish women specifically. The piece captured conflicting messages about poor Irish immigrant women as devoted, if somewhat dim-witted and passive mothers, and inferior workers. The story begins when the Irish mother is observed performing her job, the specifics of which went unidentified in the narrative.

'You will be obliged to dismiss that woman, she does her work so badly,' said Captain P. to the steward of the Sailor's Home, one day.

'I suppose I shall,' answered the steward. I took her in from pity.

'From pity? Who is she, and what is she?'

'She is a poor Irish woman, just arrived in this country; her husband died a few months ago and left her a widow, with six young children. She had left them in Ireland, and come over here to find employment to earn enough, if possible, to bring them over; such is her story and she seems honest enough.'

'Well, show her how to do her work, and keep her awhile, till we know more about her.'

⁷⁴ "Protection to Married Women," *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser & Journal*, March 10, 1849 2-5.

The narrative describes the Irish mother as "modest, diffident, and retiring, little disposed to be communicative, and with little appearance of energy of character."

The woman soon revealed to the Captain that her husband had left the family "in a little cottage and not half a quarter acre of land; and the rent was twenty-five shillings a year. I put the land into potatoes and garden vegetables for the support of the children," she explained, "but that was little, you see sir, after paying the rent." She explained to the Captain

I thought I should be obliged to take them to the poor house; so I says what I thought to the children; but Johnny says to me -- that is the second one, dear boy -- 'O, dear mother, do not send us to the poorhouse, for ye see they will not let you come with us, and we shall be separated from you, and the white swelling is there, and many of the children dies; but do, dear mother, leave us here to get along as well as we can, while you go to America; and it may be mother, with God's blessing, ye may be able to fetch us all over at last, if it be but only one at a time.' And so the children were tea[sing me day and night to come to America; so I wrote a letter to my two sisters at New York, the one at service ,the other married, for the loan of a few pounds to fetch me over; and they sent me six pounds.

According to the narrative, the woman had two sisters in New York but she never thought to use her kinship ties to save her children from destitution and starvation. Instead, she was resigned to take the children to the poorhouse, until her young son had the novel idea of chain migration.

The story continues while "the Irish mother toiled on...for weeks and even months, doing her work better, and remitting every cent of her wages, often in advance, to her children." Yet, "the mother, with her Irish heart almost crushed with the thought, that although nearly a year had passed, not enough had been saved to pay the passage money of the first child, was about resolving to go back and starve with her children in Ireland."

"By a good Providence, she was in the *Sailors' Home* - her case reached the ears of the Sailors...A subscription was started among the boarders,...and by a loan from her relatives, and an advance of her wages" she raised the money to pay the passage of the six children. After the family's happy reunion, the mother "with hair brush and comb, did all that a mother's love and ingenuity could do to improve the condition and appearance of the young voyagers."

The story ends with a moral lesson conveyed through the Irish mother who says "By the blessing of God and the kindness of the sailors...we are all here in America. The children want shoes and clothes, and the older ones employment. If we can get the latter we will soon have all the rest."

"The Irish Mother" was to a large extent sympathetic to poor widowed Irish mothers. However, the story criticizes her as well, as it opens with a woman who is a poor worker and lacking in "energy of character." It is only after her prolonged work at the Sailor's Home that she earned the financial help of the sailors, while the work itself did not pay off in wages. This story befitted the opinion of the Commercial Advertiser which, as Gerber has pointed out, "approved lower wages for the Irish." As made clear in one Advertiser article, "'it is well-known the way the Irish generally work.'"⁷⁵ This morality play implied that hard work was an end in itself which would bring success. In this way, "The Irish Mother" marked a transition from the 1830s when Chipman argued that intemperate and foreign men had only to be reformed as a way of restoring their families to a comfortable standard of living. With her family reunited, the now Americanized Irish Mother "did all that a mother's love and ingenuity could do to improve the condition and appearance" of her children. Ultimately, the Irish Mother

⁷⁵ Ibid., January 10, 1849, in Gerber, p. 138.

understood that "employment," albeit the employment of her older children, was the path to acquisition - of "shoes and clothes" and "all the rest."⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

Between 1830 and 1850, a native-born middle-class poverty discourse emerged in the Erie Canal region that became increasingly focused on immigrants in its discussion of the poor generally and poverty relief recipients specifically. The poor women in this discourse were largely morally worthy, downwardly-mobile widows and wives. Childless, single women and single mothers were for the most part absent in this discourse. During the Depression of 1837, constructions of nativity in the discourse seem to have become more important, pointing to native-born attempts to distinguish between "American" and immigrant poor people. By 1850, this construction of difference was reflected in the appearance of an emergent white, American identity forged in opposition to Irish immigrants, African-Americans and American Indians.

Concurrently, by 1850, the evidence suggests a change in constructions of women in the poverty discourse so that immigrant and chronically poor women would be distinguished from white, native-born marginal working-class and poor women. The story "The Irish Mother" captured related themes organized around foreign and specifically Irish birth, gender and class, so that the poor Irish immigrant widow was constructed differently than even the implicitly foreign-born wives in the poverty discourse of the early and mid-1830s. Unlike those earlier women, the "Irish Mother," from the writer's perspective, was in need of reform. From the native-born, Protestant, middle-class perspective, it seems that she had to be assimilated through adoption of their work ethic. "The Irish mother" would be entitled neither to dependency – like

⁷⁶ Ibid., March 12, 1849.

downwardly-mobile women – nor to real independency, like the widow in the “Test of Benevolence.”

Chapter 3

"A poor woman wants permit to go to almshouse": Women, Agency And Poverty Relief, 1829-1849

Early nineteenth century working-class women had few economic options available to them in their daily quest for survival; one of them was poverty relief. Evidence of women relief applicants reveals both working-class women's economic and social vulnerability and their agency in utilizing public assistance. In spite of its poor conditions, many women chose to utilize the poorhouse, as well as outdoor relief. These choices offer glimpses into the lives of marginal, working-class women. The circumstances that lead to their destitution and their strategies in using the poorhouse, in particular, bring to light much about working-class women's experiences, choices and values.

According to Michael Katz, "poorhouses had very clear goals: they were supposed to check the expense of pauperism through cheaper care and by deterring people from applying for relief."¹ Yet, women not only chose relief but used and even shaped the system in some ways. As for outdoor relief, according to Martha Branscombe, under the "new system" of poor relief recommended by New York's Secretary of State John V.N. Yates in 1824, "all applicants found by the overseers and justices to be eligible for relief, unless sickness prevented or only temporary relief was needed, were to be sent immediately to the poorhouse."² Whatever the intentions of policy-makers, some

¹ Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), p. 22.

² Martha Branscombe, *The Courts and the Poor Laws in New York State, 1784-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), p.31.

evidence suggests that women were able to negotiate this vague guideline to obtain the type of relief - outdoor or indoor - that they preferred.

Demographically, the women who utilized the relief system in the antebellum era were mostly relatively young women in their twenties and thirties.³ Poor department records indicate less demographic information about women recipients of outdoor relief except that certainly by the late 1840s, they were primarily foreign-born, and all of them lived with family groups. Of women paupers on indoor relief at the poorhouse, 37 percent arrived there in a variety of familial configurations.⁴ Some, like New York born, 20-year old Mrs. Corbet in 1829 and 35-year old Irish Catharin Loulove in 1844 were married, arriving with only a husband. Others, like New Hampshire born Abigail Pierce, 27, in 1829 and 26-year old Irish Hannah Shay in 1843 arrived with husbands and several children. Seventy percent of the women poorhouse inmates in families arrived as female heads of household. Single mothers like Hannah Wood, 23 and born in Massachusetts, came with their children. Wood arrived at the almshouse in 1829 with her three children; 25-year old Eliza Burk of Ireland came with her 10-day old daughter Hannah in 1838 and German-born, 40-year old Elizabeth Glons arrived there in 1854 with her five children, ages six months to eight years. In 1854, German immigrant Harriet Can, 55, came to the poorhouse with her 22-year old daughter and nine-year old grandson John. Occasionally, women arrived there as adult daughters in nuclear families, like 17-year old German immigrant Alberdin Winegert in 1854 or as extended kin, as did 69-year old Ester Chusbro also in 1854, accompanied by her son, his wife and four children.⁵

³ Table 10, "Women Pauper Inmates at the Erie County Almshouse Grouped by Age."

⁴ Table 1, "Women Pauper Inmates at the Erie County Almshouse Admitted in Families." Erie County Almshouse Registers.

⁵ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

By 1833, however, childless single women comprised the majority of women paupers on indoor relief. At the Erie County Almshouse, women like New York born 27-year old Eleonor Axlyte in 1833, 33-year old Irish immigrant Sarah Turner in 1844 and 17-year old English immigrant Mary Ann Rapson in 1854, came alone to the poorhouse, without children, husbands or other relatives.⁶

At the Erie County Almshouse, immigrant women comprised the majority of female paupers. By the early 1840s, almost three-quarters of women paupers there were foreign-born. Immigrants became almost 90% of the women by the 1850s.⁷ As a port of entry from Canada, Buffalo would certainly receive relatively large numbers of immigrants. But the Erie Canal itself provided easy access to the other cities of the region, like Rochester, Lockport, Utica and Albany, and so the high percentage of foreign-born female paupers in the poorhouse at Buffalo also suggested the demographics of the other poorhouses along the Canal.⁸

Evidence indicates that the foreign-born women differed little from the native-born women poorhouse inmates. The native and foreign-born poor women seem to have been subjected to similar economic pressures stemming from lack of access to inclusion in economically stable, male-headed families as well as a lack of resources provided by extended family and community. During the early nineteenth century, foreign-born and specifically Irish women comprised the majority of women inmates at the Erie County Almshouse, indicating their great vulnerability to impoverishment. According to David Gerber,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Table 2, "Percentage of Native-Born and Foreign-Born Women Paupers of all Women Paupers at the Erie County Almshouse.

⁸ The nativities of pauper inmates listed in the Erie County Almshouse Registers suggest the relatively easy migration from city to city along the Canal.

the Irish had few marketable skills, little education, and no money. Substantial social disorganization – poverty, crime, disease, alcoholism, and family dissolution – accompanied their resettlement in America. Such difficulties were exacerbated by strong rejection by American Protestants of their peasant ways and devout Catholicism, and by the harsh stereotypes that determined popular attitudes whenever the Irish came to mind. These obstacles limited the chances for individual lives and depressed the group's social position.⁹

In contrast, German immigrants had more skilled workers and greater wealth than the Irish. Relatively large numbers of Germans tended to require poverty relief only during economic crises. In contrast, relief was a mainstay of Irish immigrant life.¹⁰

In 1834, Samuel Chipman, a temperance activist, recorded the cases of women who applied for relief at the office of the Albany Overseer of the Poor during a two-month period. As a temperance crusader, Chipman believed that alcohol consumption caused social deviance, namely crime and poverty. He used the women's cases as evidence for his argument that intemperance was at the root of rising numbers of poor people. Despite Chipman's purpose in making these records, the cases can be used to unearth information about marginal, working-class women.¹¹

In one case, Chipman reported that

a poor woman wants permit to go to alms-house, and an order to bind out her son who is about 17 years old, and a very bad boy; she says her husband works hard, but spends all his money for liquor.¹²

⁹ David A. Gerber, *The Making of an American Pluralism* Buffalo, New York, 1825-1860 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 122-123.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130. Data from the Erie County Almshouse support Gerber's assertion. During the Depression of 1857, for example, many more German-born paupers appeared on the poorhouse rolls.

¹¹ NYPL, Samuel Chipman, "Report of an Examination of Poorhouses, Jails and c., in the State of New York and in the Counties of Berkshire, Massachusetts, Litchfield, Connecticut and Bennington, Vermont, & c., (Albany, 1834).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

This case, like others Chipman reported, reveals that it was not intemperance per se that caused the downward mobility of families, but men's legal and social privileges over their own and their wives' earnings, privileges that affected wives and children during a husband's life and influenced their economic position after his death. In their low and unstable economic position and yet privileged gender status, working-class men deemed inadequate breadwinners were a major factor in the causes of women's poverty.

The Erie County Almshouse registers reveal that attachment to an economically-stable, male-headed family was a strong factor in keeping women out of the poorhouse. Lack of attachment to men characterized the vast majority of poorhouse women in every immigrant group there.¹³ This is particularly evident with regard to single parents at the almshouse; overwhelmingly, they were women. Relatively few single fathers entered the poorhouse over the antebellum era.¹⁴ For working-class women, attachment to other wage-earners was especially important because they earned only one-third to one half of men's wages, and because of their responsibilities for the care of young children.¹⁵ Women, who dominated the numbers of single parents, had to support children on relatively meager wages or perform some other work like taking in boarders. Conversely, male pauper inmates, too, were overwhelmingly single, suggesting that a partial strategy for avoiding impoverishment lay in attachment to other wage-earners.¹⁶

¹³Table 3, "Women Paupers in the Erie County Almshouse Grouped by Nativity and Accompanied by Adult Men."

¹⁴ Table 4, "Pauper Families at the Erie County Almshouse Headed by Single Mothers and Single Fathers."

¹⁵ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982 p.59.

¹⁶ Table 3, "Women Paupers at the Erie County Almshouse Grouped by Nativity and Accompanied by Adult Men."

The failure of the family economy in the Albany case of Chipman's "poor woman" is suggested by contrasting data from the Erie County Almshouse. At the Erie County Almshouse, a decline in the numbers of women paupers in their late 30s suggests that many women somehow escaped the worst poverty at that time, perhaps as children became workers themselves. They seem to have re-experienced poverty in middle age and older, a time when children would presumably leave parents. These women appear to have lost a short-lived strategy for support.¹⁷ In contrast, the "poor woman's" son's inability or refusal to contribute to the family economy is suggested in his mother's request to have him bound out. Thus, she is not able to rely on the earnings of either her husband or her son, "a very bad boy." She may have been the only reliable source of support, if there was one, in the household. Moreover, these circumstances appear to have continued for some time, as suggested in Chipman's description of the woman as "poor." She was chronically poor, unlike the "respectable" relief applicants he mentioned in other cases. The case of the "poor woman" elucidates how fragile was working-class wives' "dependence" when the other members of the household did not contribute to the family economy.

While the failure or inability of the "poor woman's" husband to be the breadwinner made her poor, a husband's poverty did not always spell the impoverishment of his wife. In 1834, the keeper of the Niagara County Poorhouse in Lockport, New York, made this entry in his cashbook: "June 6 - Cash of Mrs. Thompson/wife of pauper Rec'd - \$2.50." In this case, Mrs. Thompson reimbursed the poorhouse for support services provided for her husband. She was not classified as a pauper, indicating that he was the only member of the family to receive relief, while she was able to maintain at least some level of economic adequacy. However, the entry also

¹⁷ Table 10, "Women Pauper Inmates at the Erie County Almshouse Grouped by Age."

suggests that if the wife of a male pauper was able to avoid impoverishment, she might be financially responsible for him, even while she was understood socially and legally as his dependent. Still, the Thompson case stands in contrast to the usual situation in which the poverty of wives and children followed the poverty of the husband and father, as indicated, for instance, by this entry recorded by the Niagara County Poorhouse Keeper: "Aug 5 - Cash to Lucas & family paupers Paid - \$2.00."¹⁸

Although the case of Chipman's "poor woman" reveals that women relief applicants had been victimized in some ways, it also demonstrates that they were able to exercise some agency in utilizing the relief system. The "poor woman," for example, enlisted the relief system in abandoning, if not escaping, her husband. Thus, the woman used the poorhouse as a sort of female refuge, a function that Yates did not intend for the institution. She indicated that she would use the poorhouse as a way of terminating her obligation to her husband in response to her husband's failure to fulfill the role of the husband and father.

While the language of the temperance movement lent morality to the "poor woman's" decision to leave her husband, her motivation seems to have varied from the primary concern of temperance activists like Chipman. According to Nancy Hewitt, for example, women temperance advocates in the later antebellum period encouraged women "to ostracize male drinkers," and Elizabeth Cady Stanton urged them not to "form an alliance with any man who has been suspected even of the vice of intemperance"¹⁹ The "poor woman" evidently left her husband for reasons stemming from his failure or choice not to comply with the breadwinner role, not because of the "immorality" of drinking.

¹⁸ Niagara County Poorhouse Cashbook, 1834.

¹⁹ Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984) pp.160, 163.

The "poor woman's" application for relief also involved her trouble with her son. She enlisted the help of the relief system in binding him out, thereby solving the problem of having a "very bad boy." In binding him out, she used indoor relief as an avenue toward control of the boy. New York Superintendents of the Poor gained authorization in 1826, "to bind out children of any poor person chargeable or likely to become chargeable to the county or town."²⁰ The superintendent's power over poor children had its roots in colonial social welfare practices. In the colonial period, when orphans lacked relatives or friends, the children were apprenticed to a householder in the community for a specified number of years.²¹ While some were orphans, "many others had both parents living. Often, parents had made all the arrangements and signed a formal contract with the couple whom their child served."²² Colonial authorities also intervened between parents and children. Rothman writes that

ministers instructed their congregants not only to raise children to be God-fearing, but to make them 'serviceable in their generation.' And statutes sought to enforce the command. If parents neglected their duty, the community had the right and obligation to intervene, to remove the child and place him in another household.²³

The case of this "very bad boy" in Chipman's record continued a long history of administrative control over marginal or deviant children.

²⁰ Branscombe, p.32, see footnote 1.

²¹ David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971) p. 206.

²² John Demos, "Notes on Life in Plymouth Colony," in Stanley N. Katz and John M. Murrin, eds., *Colonial America: Essays in Politics and Social Development*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p. 140.

²³ Rothman, p. 14.

Like the "poor woman," other poor mothers bound out their children through the relief system. In poorhouse year 1850/51, one registration record revealed that the child was "given by mother" to the Erie County Almshouse. In 1856/57, two children were "bound by mother to" other adults. In these cases, poorhouse administrators recognized the mother's power.²⁴ Usually, however, mothers seems not to have been a part of these processes or decisions, as suggested by the lack of their inclusion in children's binding-out records of the same year. The cases of many mothers seem to have fit this pattern, including two in 1856/57 who were bound out to a Frank Roth and Jacob C. Hider respectively.²⁵

At the same time, the "poor woman's" request represented a change in the relationship between mothers, community and public authorities. First, as Rothman pointed out, children were normally apprenticed to a householder in the community. In this sense, orphans or children bound out by parents went to live in the homes of neighbors. In the nineteenth century, however, a poor woman might very well lack relationships with neighbors, and, specifically, those affluent enough to utilize a son's or daughter's labor as well as to support, train and otherwise educate him or her. The woman turned to relief officials who would bind out her son to a stranger. This change seems to have marked an intensification of the role of local government in the life of the family in response to the various dislocations of the early industrial era.

Furthermore, while the law empowered the superintendents to break up poor families, the "poor woman" used the binding-out function of the relief system herself. The primary reason for binding out her son seems to have been that she could not control or socialize him to meet the norms of work. The inability of her husband to fulfill the

²⁴ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

²⁵ Ibid.

patriarchal role is evidenced in the woman's need to enlist institutional support in disciplining her son and providing for his future. Moreover, she bound him out without her husband's consent. Thus, by utilizing the relief system, the "poor woman" was empowered with some measure of legal and economic control over her son and husband in an era in which women lacked custody rights to their children.²⁶

Evidence suggests that some poor parents attempted to solve the problem of raising children in poverty by using the poorhouse system and quasi-public local Orphan Asylums to take care of their children temporarily or permanently. In 1829, native-born, 24-year old Margaret Hoffman absconded after about three months at the Erie County Almshouse, leaving her baby son there. In 1838, the Erie County Board of Supervisors ruled that juvenile poorhouse inmates would be housed in the Buffalo Orphan Asylum with the support of the county.²⁷ But some parents went directly to the Asylum and arranged to have children cared for there, and others paid what they could to the Asylum for childcare. In 1846, the Board of Trustees of the Asylum reported that "in most instances," the children that year were "half orphans who were placed in the institutions [sic] by the surviving parent or some relative, they in some instances paying a small sum weekly towards defraying the expense."²⁸ In other cases, parents surrendered their children. The managers of the Buffalo Orphan Asylum claimed in 1838 that they were "pledged to sustain or provide [for children given by parents] by an express guarantee

²⁶ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for one, urged women to "petition...state governments so to modify the laws affecting marriage and the custody of children." See Stanton in Hewitt, p. 163.

²⁷ Erie County Board of Supervisors Annual Meetings, October 10, 1838.

²⁸ "Tenth Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Buffalo Orphan Asylum" (Buffalo, 1846), p. 4.

given to their parents at the time they were surrendered.”²⁹ In some cases, the parent surrendered the child “on account of sickness or poverty being unable to provide for it.”

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Yet this choice of support could also carry great loss. The Buffalo Orphan Asylum stipulated that “the parents of such children as are admitted to its privileges are required to sign a bond by which their children are surrendered entirely into the hands of the Managers until they become of lawful age.” This rule applied to all of the poor parents who relinquished their children to the Asylum, parents, “one or both of [whom] have been disabled by misfortune from providing for their necessities; and also [to parents] one or both of [whom] have become incapacitated, by immoral habits” from raising and educating their children. The rule was designed to “prevent much officious and distracting intermeddling from parents, to which the Institution must, without it, be continually subjected.”³¹

Parents, however, whose children arrived at the Buffalo Orphan Asylum as a consequence of poorhouse commitment also lost their parental authority. According to the Asylum managers, children inmates transferred from the poorhouse were “under control of the civil authorities; and [were] removed and bound out in eligible families, at the option of the (proper public officer).”³² Thus, seeking a public form of child support could very well mean losing custody of children and being divested of parental authority. Yet, some other women simply abandoned their children; the children later arrived at the

²⁹ “Report of the Trustees and Managers of the Society established in the City of Buffalo for the Relief of Orphan and Destitute Children” (Buffalo, 1838), p. 10.

³⁰ “Tenth Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Buffalo Orphan Asylum” (Buffalo, 1846), p. 4.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 10.

poorhouse in other hands. At the Erie County Almshouse in 1860/61, for example, #436 was “abandoned by Mother.” In 1854, Infant Obrien, number 342, was “abandoned by Catharine Obrien, # 277.” The poorhouse keeper made mention of the mother in this rare note: “Abandoned her child in the streets of Buffalo..and brought to Poor[house].”³³

A married woman’s choice of temporary relief at home or a stay at the poorhouse evidently depended on the location of her husband. If the husband left the home, according to Chipman's Albany evidence, she stayed there and requested temporary relief but if the husband did not leave the home, she might choose to go to the almshouse. In this way, if he would not reconfigure the family by leaving, she might depart herself. Chipman reported, for example, that "a woman with five children asked assistance, the husband is a drunken vagabond." As a "vagabond," the husband apparently absented himself from the household and the wife applied for outdoor relief which would allow her to remain at home. In contrast, the "wife of a very respectable mechanic" applied to be sent to the almshouse with her three children after her husband no longer provided. Similarly, the "poor woman" applied to be sent to the poorhouse and to have her son bound out because her husband siphoned his earnings away from the support of the family. In these latter cases, the women requested indoor relief at the poorhouse. These married women used the poorhouse as a way of removing themselves from a household with a failed breadwinner.³⁴ Yet, if that breadwinner were to be replaced, relief was only a temporary substitute.

Data from the Erie County Almshouse reveal that over the antebellum era, women in male-headed families comprised a declining percentage of women poorhouse inmates.

³³ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

³⁴ Chipman, pp. 90-92.

Abramowitz implies that this demographic change was a function of the changing nativity and marital status of the inmates:

by 1860...the foreign-born, primarily the Irish, comprised 80 percent of the Erie County Poorhouse inmates. With this shift, young unmarried women unable to obtain other sources of help replaced families as the predominant group in the almshouse.³⁵

But, native-born and immigrant women alike experienced this change. For example, in Erie County, the population of native-born women poorhouse inmates in male-headed families declined from 30% of the native-born women in 1829 to 6% by the mid-50s. Among the Irish women at the poorhouse, the population of women in male-headed families declined from 50% of the Irish women inmates to 6% over the same period. By the 1850s, however, the native-born women seemed to be experiencing a similar “loss” of men.³⁶

The percentage of nuclear pauper families declined from (4 of 20=) 20 percent of poorhouse families in 1829 to less than 13 percent of pauper inmate families there by 1854/55. At the same time, the percentage of female-headed pauper inmate families at the almshouse increased from (13 of 20 =) 65 percent of the pauper families there in 1829 to (83 of 110 =) over 75 percent of the pauper inmate families there in 1854/55.³⁷ Thus,

³⁵ Abramowitz, p. 157.

³⁶ Erie County Almshouse Registers, Before the 1850s, the population of Irish pauper families at the almshouse tended to include a higher percentage of men than in the native-born group. See Table 3, “Women Paupers at the Erie County Almshouse Grouped by Nativity and Accompanied by Adult Men.”

³⁷ Table 11.

the focus on widows in the 1830s and 40s poverty discourse may have reflected at least in part an increasingly population of female heads-of-household.

Another of Chipman's records reveals, too, the circumstances of women's poverty, as well as women's agency in utilizing the poverty relief system:

A respectable appearing woman applied for a load of wood; has a sick child and no resources except her own labor... You are a widow, I presume: said I. 'No sir, worse than a widow, was the reply. Where is your husband? 'In the country; he has afforded me no assistance in bringing up my children for a long time.' Why does not your husband assist you? 'He is a drunkard.'³⁸

In this case, male abandonment, amplified by the woman's inadequate "resources" earned by "her own labor" and her child's illness, spelled the impoverishment of a female-headed family. The Erie County Almshouse registers, too, show abandonment as a cause of female poverty. In 1860/61, for example, a rare note in the register said that Irish immigrant Mary Hibbard, #754, was "deserted by husband." Pauper inmate # 1999 that year, too, an epileptic, was "abandoned by husband." While Chipman's outdoor relief applicants in the 1830s explained their poverty by abandonment, poorhouse registers mentioned abandonment relatively rarely, while "intemperance" was listed as the common cause of women's poorhouse residence.

Chipman's case of the "respectable appearing woman" revealed the periodic poverty that many women experienced. That the woman needed a "load of wood" to warm her sick child exemplified the seasonality of impoverishment. As one 1839 comment in the Buffalo Daily Republican cried, "Let no man hold back" in benevolence to the poor. "Remember that we have had a very severe winter; remember the Widow and

³⁸ Chipman, p. 90.

the Fatherless."³⁹ Furthermore, the registers of the Erie County Almshouse reveal that women and children who were dependent on men tended to escape poverty during the warmer months while women and children without men had to rely on the poorhouse more steadily throughout the year. This finding suggests that while the need for heating fuel could impoverish women without men in the winter, other very basic needs, too, spelled the difference between survival and destitution. For many single women and single mothers, winter was just another season of impoverishment.⁴⁰

In claiming that she was "worse than a widow," the "respectable appearing woman" revealed that abandoned wives had their own particular problems as women who lacked a male breadwinner within marriage. As Nancy F. Cott writes,

A married woman had no legal existence apart from her husband's: she could not sue, contract, or even execute a will on her own; her person, estate, and wages became her husband's when she took his name...A wife's property and earnings belonged to her husband. Only when single and over eighteen, or widowed, did a woman own her own labor power and property.⁴¹

Thus, while the "respectable appearing woman" lacked the support of a male breadwinner, she continued to bear the legal deprivations of marriage, and occupied a more precarious position than did a widow. Such a woman's eligibility for private and public "charity" might also be questionable because the husband was still alive. As Branscombe points out, "responsibility for the support of any person, who because of poverty, sickness, or other misfortune, was unable to maintain himself, rested in the first

³⁹"The Suffering Poor," *Buffalo Daily Republican*, 7 February, 1839, 2-2.

⁴⁰ Table 5, "Women Pauper Inmates at the Erie County Almshouse by Month and Family Type, 1829 and 1854/55."

⁴¹ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 5 and 21.

instance upon relatives within certain degrees of kinship who were of "sufficient ability."⁴² A deserted wife, too could not remarry. Yet, abandonment was evidently a more available or attractive option to poor men than was divorce. And, as Stansell suggests, "male absence and desertion may also have generally increased" during the antebellum era.⁴³ Given her legal limitations and appearance of immorality, the "respectable appearing woman" had ample reasons to claim that as a deserted wife, she was "worse than a widow."

As the middle-class poverty discourse discussed in Chapter Two reveals, during most of the antebellum era, the middle class considered poor widows, along with orphans, to be worthy of charity. According to this discourse, the public had an obligation to "remember the widow" but not other poor women. Single women and single mothers were, at best, rendered invisible if not unworthy of public dependence. Not surprisingly, Chipman was quick to ask about the woman's respectability; that is, was the child legitimate or illegitimate? ("You are a widow, I presume.") Furthermore, the woman's respectability was suspect because she was abandoned. As Cott posits, women's role "was to be wives and mothers, to nurture and maintain their families, to provide religious example and inspiration, and to affect the world around by exercising private moral influence."⁴⁴ Abandoned women did not fit in this ideology of domesticity, as they had failed in reforming their husbands and maintaining family unity.

The claim of the "respectable appearing woman," suggests that at least some women shaped their applications for relief, thereby gaining access to the public support they needed while avoiding suspicions of their own morality. The "respectable appearing

⁴² Branscombe, p.83.

⁴³ Stansell, pp.12, 45.

⁴⁴ Cott, p. 8.

woman," for example, brought Chipman to her home which, like a text in itself, supported his thesis that male intemperance made paupers of respectable women. According to Chipman's description, "every thing [in her residence] bore the marks of industry and neatness, and poverty." The woman's victimization was further highlighted by the husband's flight to the "country," an unspecified location away from the ills of the city and hard to reach for support. Finally, her appearance as "respectable" suggested that she had experienced downward-mobility as a result of some "misfortune" and not through her own actions. In a society that judged poor widows to be the most deserving poor women, the still-married "respectable appearing woman" could successfully represent herself as worthy, receive outdoor relief and maintain her identity as "respectable."

Put another way, Chipman's records suggest that women may have used the language of intemperance as a way of getting the help they needed from middle-class, male administrators. In temperance ideology, drinking was the primary cause of poverty, crime and men's failure to support their families with cash. But temperance crusaders, like Chipman, took the uses of alcohol out of their social context. Drinking alcohol played a normative role in Irish and German cultures, as it had among Anglo-Saxons just a decade earlier. According to Paul Johnson, even

most temperance advocates had been drinking all their lives, for until the middle 1820s liquor was an absolutely normal cultural component...Liquor was embedded in the pattern of irregular work and easy sociability sustained by the household economy.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Johnson, pp.56-57.

By the late 1820s, "the temperance question was... a middle-class obsession" that linked social deviance, especially crime and poverty, with alcohol consumption.⁴⁶ By the 1830s,

the doorway to a middle-class home separated radically different kinds of space: drunkenness and promiscuous sociability on the outside, privacy and icy sobriety indoors...these private little homes - increasingly under the governance of pious housewives - were inappropriate places in which to get drunk.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, "heavy drinking" remained a part of working-class men's lives.⁴⁸ Heavy drinking played a role among society's most marginal people in particular, suggesting that unemployment, poverty and social dislocation were intertwined with alcohol use. The Erie County Almshouse records, for example, show "delirium tremens" an occasional reason for poorhouse admittance. Yet, the language of temperance equated drinking with deviance by removing alcohol use from its social context.

Framing their husbands as intemperate while appearing temperate themselves preserved the women's respectability and entitlement to dependence either upon a husband or the relief system. As Ryan explains, "temperance was advanced as a kind of class characteristic in its own right, a sure guarantee of respectability, reliability, and general moral and economic worth."⁴⁹

Likewise, another of Chipman's cases involved a man who had once been a "good mechanic." "For some years," Chipman recorded, "he has been dissipated, and has been supplied with liquor in a great measure from his wife's earnings." The account does not

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.55.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp.56-57.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp.57-58.

⁴⁹ Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 135.

reveal why the husband was no longer a "good mechanic" or why it was the earnings of his wife and not any of his own that "supplied" his liquor.⁵⁰ In another case,

the wife of a very respectable mechanic, applied to be sent with her three children, to the alms-house...The husband has been in good business, and has received \$1.50 per day; employment enough, but for some weeks, he has absented himself from his shop; has spent his time in drinking, and his earnings and credit to pay for it. His family are supported by the public, by the earnings of the sober and industrious.⁵¹

Here too, the record is silent about why he suddenly "absented himself from his shop." In each of these cases, the husband's drinking seems to be related to some occurrence in his employment history, perhaps the inability to get or keep a job. Yet, drinking appears as the sole cause of the wives' impoverishment, while any hint of deprivation represented by husbands' unemployment is absent.

This pattern of silence about husbands' employment histories in the women's descriptions suggests two possibilities about the women relief applicants. One possibility is that they agreed with Chipman that their husbands' intemperance caused their (the wives') poverty. While the temperance crusade was primarily a middle-class phenomenon, it was a popular issue among some pockets of the working-class.⁵² Among the women who talked to Chipman, one said that her "husband was a dear good man, only he would take a drop too much," while another said that "her husband works hard, but spends all his money for liquor."⁵³ While these women evidently did not object to their husbands' drinking, they did seem to advocate some moderation in the use of alcohol. These women may have agreed with Chipman that the men's drinking *caused*

⁵⁰ Chipman, p.91.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

⁵² Ryan, pp. 132-133.

⁵³ Chipman, pp. 91-92.

their (the women's) impoverishment. In fact, they may have learned over the previous few years that drinking alcohol was in itself the cause of downward-mobility. As Ryan points out, "intemperance...was conceived of as the classic precipitant of downward mobility."⁵⁴

A second possibility is that some women chose to focus on intemperance as the cause of poverty as a way of gaining Chipman's and the Overseer of the Poor's sympathy and access to outdoor relief. In his determination to establish a link between male intemperance and female and juvenile poverty, Chipman may very well have biased his representations of the women's testimonies so that they supported his thesis. However, the women themselves may have understood how to represent themselves as a way of getting the form of relief that they preferred.

While the middle-class poverty discourse tended to focus on women in families, the majority of women inmates at the Erie County Almshouse were single women without children. In Chipman's account, these women do not speak for themselves and he quickly dismisses them with the note that they were sent to the poorhouse. In all these cases, he attributes their poverty to alcohol abuse. For example:

The first applicant was a female. She had lately come from the west; was entirely destitute of money, and almost of clothing was sent to the alms-house. Acknowledges she had been intemperate.

In another case, "A female asked to be sent to alms-house, she is intemperate," and, in a third case, "A woman applied to be sent to alms-house, she has been there before, and in jail; is intemperate."⁵⁵ These accounts attest to the extreme poverty suffered by women outside of family groups, in that they apparently had no place stay. Moreover, they

⁵⁴ Ryan, p. 135.

⁵⁵ Chipman, pp. 90-91.

would not have qualified for temporary relief and a temporary payment may not have improved their situation. According to Branscombe, indoor relief was to be given to able-bodied applicants unless “only temporary relief was needed.”⁵⁶ Evidence suggests that single women lacked the choice of temporary relief that would have helped them to avoid the poorhouse. A list of temporary relief applicants in Rochester revealed that single women and men were not among the applicants for or recipients of outdoor relief. All of them were in families.⁵⁷ Among Chipman's recorded cases, none of the single women received temporary relief while married women had wider latitude in choosing indoor or outdoor relief.⁵⁸

Between 1829 and 1861, single women comprised the majority of women pauper inmates during the antebellum era.⁵⁹ The increase in the numbers of single women at the Erie County Almshouse tended to be rooted among young women in their 20s and early 30s. This finding points to what Alice Kessler-Harris has identified as the increasing superfluity of native-born daughter's household labor and Hasia Diner's discussion of single Irish women's immigration. Living outside of family units, some young women were subject to social and economic pressures stemming from lives lived in alienation from family and community relationships.

While women chose to use the relief system and the poorhouse particularly in a variety of ways, the choice to receive poverty relief was not without its dangers and costs. The grim circumstances that motivated women to seek poverty relief could be exacerbated by the dangers of becoming a relief recipient or poorhouse resident. Writing about the Erie County Poorhouse, Charles L. posits that “the most persistent and visible

⁵⁶ Branscombe, p. 31.

⁵⁷ “Relief of the Poor,” Rochester Daily Democrat, January 24, 1849, 2-2.

⁵⁸ Chipman, pp. 90-92.

⁵⁹ TABLE

sign of the poorhouse's inadequacy was its appalling death rate." In 1844/45, the mortality rate was 1 of 20 and in 1847/48, one of six.⁶⁰

Many of the deaths in the poorhouse were those of children. The poorhouse physician attended to children brought in when ill but relatively healthy children at the poorhouse were vulnerable to diseases during their time there. According to an Oneida County list of poorhouse births and deaths, small pox broke out in the poorhouse in December of 1834 and continued until February, 1835. The seventy-eight deaths occurred among "the aged, inferm [sic], sickly children and infants and insane."⁶¹ Thus while poorhouses provided a refuge for poor women and their children in some ways, these institutions also presented the threat of children's sickness and death.

Meanwhile, in an era when the middle class prized family privacy and solidarity, poor women faced the dispersal of their families as children (but not babies) were routed to orphanages or bound out. As Abramowitz writes

Nineteenth-century child-welfare policy reflected numerous concerns about women's roles and proper family management. Indeed poor law officials continued the colonial practice of removing children of "unfit" mothers from their homes, indenturing them, or placing them in the almshouses.⁶²

In the winter of 1833, for example, Lydia Van Jeckle and her husband Garrett of New Jersey, entered the Erie County poorhouse with heir three children, 11 year old Garrett Junior, 10 year old James and 3-year old Eliza. Eliza died shortly after the family's arrival at the almshouse. Garret Sr. absconded about a week later, and Garret Junior and

⁶⁰ Charles L. Bland, "Institutions of Charity in Jacksonian Erie County: 1829-1861," State University of New York at Buffalo, Paper submitted to Dr. Lewis Perry, Department of History, 1975, p.10.

⁶¹ "Births & Deaths at the County Poor House," p. 22.

⁶² Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1996), pp. 163-164.

James were each bound out to residences in separate towns. Approximately four months after entering the poorhouse, Lydia gave birth to Harriet Ann, the only remaining member of her family that once numbered five.

Even poor widows, who were depicted in the poverty discourse as legitimately dependent, faced moral criteria in applying for outdoor relief. The evidence suggests that former class position or "respectability" determined poor women's worthiness. As Chapter Three demonstrates, middle-class relief administrators considered poorhouse residence to be the proper form of relief for single and apparently intemperate women. The poorhouse, then, was the place for deviant or "unworthy" poor women while "respectable" women, widows primarily, had access to the outdoor relief that allowed them to remain in their own homes.

The comment of one woman who talked to Chipman conveys the shame that some downwardly mobile women experienced in going to the poorhouse. Chipman asked a woman who came into the overseer's office "whether she wanted assistance from the overseer."

'No," was the very prompt and as I thought, indignant reply. I found at last that she wanted to pay her tax to the collector. She paid it and appeared to be much relieved, but sadness still brooded over her countenance. She said that her husband died a year or two since; left a small house and lot on which there was a mortgage of \$200, which she was trying to raise by her own labor, while she supported herself and six children...but I'll not go to the alms-house, I'll die first.'⁶³

The woman's comment reveals her anxiety about her class position; she was haunted by the possibility that she could fall into poverty. As her preference to "die" before going to the poorhouse revealed, she had much at stake in maintaining her lower middle-class

⁶³ Chipman, pp.90-91.

status. No doubt, her property represented a bulwark against the disrespectability of poorhouse residence.

The woman revealed an ideology in which the poorhouse was constructed as the terminus of downward-mobility, a place from which there was no return. But the chronically poor knew that the almshouse was only a temporary resort. As Katz points out, "many almshouse residents stayed for only a short time, most less than six weeks."⁶⁴ They weaved relief in and out of their lives. Even relief at the poorhouse was not an end in itself but was integrated into many working-class women's lives.

The great degree to which women integrated relief and even the poorhouse into their lives was revealed in poorhouse marriages. Evidence of marriages at the Monroe and Albany County poorhouses in the 1840s and 1850s illustrate the different constructions of manhood, womanhood and marriage among the working and middle classes. Most notably, in 1847, the Rochester Police Justice married a 50-year old groom, an "Irishman" who appears in the record as "Melacky" to "Bridget, an Irish woman," the 35-year old bride.⁶⁵ That the record indicates "no marriages at the Poorhouse in 1848" and "no marriages at the Poorhouse in 1849" suggests that while poorhouse marriages may have been few in number, they were not entirely unexpected. It was a legitimate occurrence in the lives of poorhouse inmates and one to which paupers were evidently entitled.

Making the decision to become married while interred at the poorhouse meant bringing one of the most basic cultural patterns into the poorhouse, an institution which in many ways stood apart from the world of the middle-class but evidently not from

⁶⁴ Katz' conclusion is based on data between 1829 and 1866. Katz, 72-86, 245.

⁶⁵ "Vital Records, 1847-1850 from Town of Brighton, NY and Monroe County Poorhouse."

working-class life. As marriage, historically, has been an important statement to the larger community and a basic pattern in human societies, poorhouse marriages suggested that the almshouse was a part of the larger community.

That working-class marriages did not necessarily imply the same privacy and separations from "the world" as did middle-class marriages was also shown in a case of inmate marriage at the Albany County Poorhouse. William Hurst, poorhouse superintendent testified that, "James Rush is employed as cook in paupers' kitchen...has a wife; married her in the institution two or three years ago; do not have any separate room."⁶⁶

Pauper marriages demonstrate that constructions of "husband" and "wife" varied by class. For middle-class men, marriage was the benchmark of adult manhood in that it signified the assumption of the status of full independence insofar as that meant taking on a wife and children, feminized family dependents.⁶⁷ But Bridget's husband, Melacky, a dependent himself, could not fulfill this role. Bridget, too, as a public dependent, did not have a household under her command. Her "sphere" was as public as her husband's.

That at least some of the marriages were entirely voluntary, that is, unconnected to any obligation to marry as a result of pregnancy, was implied by the ages of some of the brides and grooms. E. Knap and Caroline Bowen who were married at the Monroe County Poorhouse in the summer of 1850 were ages 65 and 45 respectively. Two weeks later, John Allen, age 60, married his 55-year old bride Margaret Waters. That the women were past their reproductive years evidenced the couples' mutual desire to marry.

⁶⁶ "Almshouse Affairs, Reports of the Committee of the Supervisors (with evidence taken) the Majority and Minority Reports of the Committee of the Common Council" (Albany, December 19, 1859), p.33.

⁶⁷ See E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 132.

Still, there could be other functional reasons for them to marry, for example, each might have an easier life in combining their wages and sharing their miseries. Brides Waters and Bowen and grooms Knap and Allen had little of material value to offer, if anything, except the hope of better luck in the future

While the poorhouse may have been the site of marital happiness for some, it could also be a place of marital strife, violence and tragic consequences. In 1854, 40-year old Irish Patrick Kane committed suicide at the Erie County Almshouse. The record for wife Jane, 35, reveals that Kane murdered her before taking his own life. The notation next to her entry in the almshouse register says “throat cut by her husband.” Son William, 4, the surviving member of the family, had already been transferred to the Orphan Asylum when the murder occurred. That the poorhouse staff was shocked at the occurrence was revealed in one of the only additional notes in the body of Erie County Almshouse registers between 1829 and 1860. The comment revealed that the event took place in the evening.⁶⁸

Some evidence hints that women may have used the poorhouse as a refuge from abusive husbands. In 1850/51, Irish-born Ellen Maloney, #847, went to the poorhouse with a “broken arm.” Maloney’s two children, Margaret, age 2 and 6-month old Michael arrived with her and were sent to the Buffalo Orphan Asylum. While the keeper listed the woman’s injury as the direct cause of her poorhouse commitment, the indirect cause was “drunken husband.”⁶⁹ Though it is tempting to imagine that the woman wanted to use the poorhouse as a refuge from her husband, there is not evidence to conclude decisively that this was the case. In effect, however, she gained an escape from him, in that she remained at the Almshouse into the following year. That the woman gained

⁶⁸ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

⁶⁹ Ibid..

admittance to the poorhouse because she had a broken arm indicates that she was seeking medical attention, but such an injury could only increase a woman's dependence.

In 1859, William Hurst, Superintendent of the Albany County Almshouse, revealed one way that a few women found relative security and weaved the poorhouse into their strategy for survival. Hurst described his employees, including two women who patched together a living for themselves and their children by combining meager wages and public assistance.

Eliza Brown is one of the help at the hospital, at \$3 per month; she has two children there; she does not pay for their support; she was sent there as a pauper... We always paid the cook at the hospital, and she was the best person we could get to do that work. It is impossible to get any one to stay in that building with no other tie than her mere support as a pauper. [She] has been at the Alms House about three years; she would not have staid [sic] a day if it were not for her children, who were there; I think she would leave the institution if we did not pay her.

Julia Roach is employed in cooking for the help, at \$3 per month; ... is not to have more; she had two children there, who have left; the children are at the Orphan Asylum, at county expense.⁷⁰

Brown and Roach demonstrated that though they were poor, they were not passive recipients of "charity." These women used the relief available to them in the form of childcare while pressing for greater wages for themselves. Without the support of a formal organization like a labor union or even the labor resistance of other poorhouse staff members, Brown and Roach pressured the poorhouse keeper and the Superintendents of the Poor, and were to a small extent successful in getting their demands heard, if not met.

The limits of these working-class women's demands and power was revealed in the case of another woman who worked for Hurst at the Albany Poorhouse.

⁷⁰ "Almshouse Affairs," pp. 32-33.

Betsey Blake was employed to take care of the children; I collected, I think, at one time \$10 for her from the city; she receives no pay now other than extra clothing and extra living.⁷¹

Blake had evidently convinced Hurst to lobby for her cause with the city council, resulting in a payment of ten dollars. The payment indicated the male council's ambivalence about Blake's categorization as a worker. As the literature on middle-class antebellum motherhood has shown, childcare, along with housework, was the vocation of women, and this work existed outside of the cash nexus and away from the "world."⁷² The city's refusal to pay Blake for her childcare responsibilities indicated that taking care of children, even when the work was performed outside the home and by a woman who was not the mother, did not qualify as "work." Blake's initial attempt to demand cash wages indicated that, at least, some working-class women did not agree with the ideology that naturalized women's work in childcare, particularly in a case where the children were not her own. Evidently, Hurst agreed with her to a certain extent, as evidenced by the fact that he brought her case before the city council. Ultimately unable to become a paid employee at the poorhouse and unable to secure a better living with pay elsewhere, Blake stayed at the Albany Poorhouse and found compensation in food, shelter and "extra clothing and extra living."

Most of the female poorhouse employees combined their work with family life, either as single or married mothers. The institution provided secure work in a setting where children were provisioned with basic subsistence, often including some schooling. In this way, the women made a sort of home out of the poorhouse.

⁷¹ Ibid., p.33.

⁷² For antebellum, middle-class constructions of women's work in childcare, see Cott and Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 42-44.

Once committed to the poorhouse, evidence from Erie County indicates that women chose to leave the institution when they wanted to, ostensibly when they met their needs there or until they no longer wanted to stay. The data suggest that between 1829 and 1855, between 3% and 13% of the women pauper inmates “absconded,” leaving secretly.⁷³ The women absconded after a few days or a few weeks at the almshouse. Evidence does not indicate why the women left secretly. What is clear, however, is that they chose to terminate their commitment at the poorhouse, suggesting that the pauper women used the poorhouse as they saw fit, without waiting to be officially discharged, beginning and ending their stay when they wanted to. In 1829, native-born, 24-year old Margaret Hoffman absconded after about three months at the Erie County Almshouse, leaving her baby son there. In late 1843, German, 18-year old Margret Dayan arrived at the almshouse “sick.” She absconded about four months later. In one case, 35-year old Mary Bloomfield, born in Spain, absconded on the same August day on which she arrived at the almshouse.⁷⁴

The apparent ease with which paupers absconded is strongly suggested by cases in 1838/39 involving women and children absconding together. Twenty-six year-old Philora Eighma absconded with her seven month old daughter Harriet after about five months at the Erie County Almshouse. Eighma had three commitments at the poorhouse in 1838/39 and absconded after two of them. Twenty-nine year-old Sally Ann Clout and her five year old son John absconded after about six months there, and twenty-eight year old Caroline Gean and her three children, ages 10, 8 and 6, absconded after less than two weeks there. In 1855, Irish-born 31-year old Ellen Ryan and her two-year old son Martin absconded together about two and a half weeks after entering the poorhouse.⁷⁵

⁷³Table 6, “Absconding Women Paupers at the Erie County Almshouse.”

⁷⁴Erie County Almshouse Registers.

⁷⁵Ibid.

While the Erie Canal facilitated the easy transport of goods, it also allowed for greater population mobility, and poor women took advantage of this opportunity. For many women, working-class life was transient. As transients, women would have only shallow roots in a new place of settlement. That the majority of Erie County Almshouse women inmates were born elsewhere suggests that they were cut off from kin or community networks that might have helped to sustain them.

The degree of transience of poor women is revealed in the registration records of several families at the Erie County Almshouse. In 1839, for example, 34-year old Ann Tracy and her three sons, ages four, 17-months and six months, arrived at the Erie County Almshouse after traveling from Ireland to Canada to Buffalo. Tracy and the baby died there. Irish immigrant Catharine McNevin had daughter Bridgett in Canada, daughter Julia Ann in Lawrence County, New York, and son Thomas in Cayuga County, New York, before taking up residence in Buffalo. The children were born two years apart. Eliza Scott, also of Ireland, had son John in Canada and daughter Minerva in Chatauqua County, New York, before traveling to Buffalo. Elizabeth Gregory was born in New Hampshire, had her daughter Margaret in Holland, an Erie County town, daughter Saphrony in Michigan and then traveled back east to Buffalo. Deborah Brockett and husband Stillson, of New Hampshire and New Jersey respectively had their son Bradley in Monroe County, daughter Betsy in Onandaga County and entered the Erie County Almshouse in the winter of 1838.⁷⁶ In the cases of Elizabeth Gregory in Buffalo and a woman in Albany who "had lately come from the west; was entirely destitute of money, and almost of clothing," poorhouses aided women moving in a counter-migration from West to East.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Chipman, p. 90.

Evidence reveals that some families used the poorhouse as a way of making migration possible. According to Chipman, many inmates of one New York State county belonged to “families, the fathers of which have left them to be provided for...at the public expense; while they have gone to the west to provide places to which to remove their families in the spring.” Chipman subtly objected that these male heads of household chose to have their families “provided for...at the public expense,” though he was sure to point out that they were temperate. The men had too little means to sustain their families in their absence.⁷⁸ They used public assistance to aid in their economic and social role as male heads-of-household.

Although transient women were no doubt moving in search of a better life, migration had its dangers. Evidence suggests that migrating women faced a dual estrangement from kin or other support networks, earlier and later in life. Women who had migrated might be left alone when their grown children migrated to yet another location. Two findings support this conclusion. First, in poorhouse years 1833/34 and 1838/39 combined, 60 percent of the elderly women inmates at the Erie County Almshouse were born in another state. The women entered the poorhouse alone, unaccompanied by kin. Second, one woman, Sarah Besse, a 64-year old pauper born in New Hampshire, was discharged with the note “gone to her son’s.”⁷⁹ These cases begin to suggest that women who migrated relatively far from their place of birth earlier in life faced the risk of not being able to rely on kin networks during the last stage of their lives when their other options for support were most limited. This finding modifies Katz’

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

⁷⁹ The data for 1833/34 and 1838/39 include five women paupers over the age of 60. They all entered the poorhouse alone. Of these women paupers, three were born in another state and two in another New York county. One of the elderly women born in another county was relatively far from home, as her birthplace, Dutchess County, is among the farthest from Erie County.

conclusion that "the low number of elderly women probably reflects the greater willingness of children to take in aged mothers than fathers and the greater ease with which poor law officials aided women."⁸⁰

Evidence suggests that single women traveling alone knew that they could rely on the system of poorhouses connecting the region. Poorhouses were reliable places to which poor women could go, as indicated in the case of 21-year old Clarissa Richardson of Wayne County, New York who had given birth to her daughter Lucy in the Rochester Poorhouse six years earlier and, in 1839, entered the Erie County poorhouse for three days. Twenty-six year old Rose Ducy, an Irish immigrant and her daughter Mary, born in Toronto, entered the Erie County Almshouse in December of 1838, returning in the spring. In the same year, 22-year old Charlotte Van Tassel of Saratoga entered and left the poorhouse only to return a few months later. Though recidivism was relatively rare, these cases suggest that women could move in and out of the system as needed.⁸¹

Poverty relief documents reflect the social dislocation that marked the early nineteenth century as well as the emerging need for public healthcare. In an era lacking protections for workers, illness was often a door to destitution. In the pre-industrial era, healthcare had been largely a community-based female function provided by female kin and neighbors. Doctors, less available than community women and lacking in women's knowledge and skills, and, less welcome at first at sick and laboring women's bedsides, provided care in more urgent situations. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, male doctors slowly began to replace female healers and midwives.⁸² In the fast-growing

⁸⁰ Abramovitz, p.157.

⁸¹ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

⁸² See Catherine M. Scholten, "On the Importance of the Obstetrick Art': Changing Customs of Childbirth in America, 1760-1825," in Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women, Families, and Communities: Readings in American History, Volume One: To 1877* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman/Little, Brown Higher Education), pp.78-89. Also see Laurel Thatcher

cities of the Erie Canal region, working-class women, sick, disabled, pregnant or accompanied by a sick child or other sick family members, and alienated from female kinship and community bonds, turned increasingly to the poverty relief system for access to healthcare. If a woman could avoid poverty when she was relatively healthy, there was a good chance that she might need it in medical emergencies. Poverty relief system data illustrate the close connection between sickness or injury and poverty.

Chipman, for instance, recorded the case of "an old colored woman who was sick, was sent to the almshouse," and "a family who...applied for the Ward Physician." In another case he wrote, "an English family sent to alms-house...The long continued illness of the husband is doubtless the cause of their poverty." Yet another case involved "an aged couple, the husband 82 years old, the wife sick."⁸³ In 1838, single, 20-year old Martha Van George of Fishkill, New York, went to the poorhouse in late October, 1838, and died there less than three weeks later. In 1844, Scottish immigrants Janette Willox and her husband James turned to the Almshouse when sick, and were accompanied by their healthy 3-year old son. In the same year, Scottish immigrant Margaret Dunbar stayed at the Almshouse twice as a result of "old age." She was 105 years old. In 1854, 36-year old single German immigrant Anna Blenstein came to the poorhouse pregnant. According to data from the Erie County Almshouse, over most of the antebellum era, about one in five of the women admitted to the Erie County Almshouse went there because they needed medical attention for various illnesses, diseases and injuries, as well as for pregnancy and labor.⁸⁴

Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

⁸³ Chipman, pp. 90-92.

⁸⁴ Table 7, "Women Pauper Inmates at the Erie County Almshouse Admitted for Reasons Related to Medical Needs (Unhealthy or Pregnant Women)."

Frequently, women went to the poorhouse during the most painful days of their lives. At the Oneida County Poorhouse, for example, Betsey Castleman was "delivered of a girl 24 February 1830 -- Labour & presentation natural." The 35-year-old Castleman returned to the poorhouse about two months later, where she "died April 18th 1830 - of Typhous Fever."⁸⁵ As seen in the Albany data from the 1830s, if working-class women and men were able to avoid "relief" in the course of their lives, there was a good chance that many would need this support system in childbirth, sickness and death.

Some families who might not have required public assistance for the living might have needed it for the dead, in the form of coffins. Chipman recorded three such cases. In one, a man and woman "appli[ed] for a coffin for a child." In another case, a husband applied for "a coffin...for a woman who died very suddenly last night; want of employment was the reason assigned for asking assistance." In another case, a "man sent from the police office to jail...is dead, and a coffin must be furnished; he has left a wife and five or six children."⁸⁶

Evidence from Monroe County suggests that domestic servants may have been particularly dependent on the poorhouse. A list of deaths at the Monroe County Poorhouse reveals the occupations of 19 of the women who died there between 1848 and 1850. Not surprisingly, the 19 women all performed labor deemed appropriate for females: "servant," "house labor," "house work," and one listed herself as a "tailoress." Most were foreign-born and unmarried, more than likely the Irish who dominated domestic work. In Buffalo, for example, in the 1850s, 90 percent of daughters in Irish families took jobs as live-in servants by age eighteen.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ "Births & Deaths at the County Poor House," pp. 3-4.

⁸⁶ Chipman, p. 91.

⁸⁷ Diner, p. 89.

The Monroe County Poorhouse data suggest that domestic servants had worked in the homes and for the families of middle-class women but were never members of those families and households. The women died at the Poorhouse outside of Rochester, unable to get medical attention except through the relief system. The data indicate that they went to the poorhouse when ill, ending their days there. These employment relationships stand in contrast to the familiarity and even literally family-like work relationships in colonial households. In Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's work on the life of midwife Martha Ballard, for example, female workers in the Ballard household were almost all the daughters of local men. Ulrich observes that the labor of the young women was shared "as part of the larger system of neighborly exchange."⁸⁸ But antebellum domestic servants, like other unskilled male and female workers, were removed from community relations with employers and were mere employees. Despite the intimate living and working arrangements, their relationships with their employers were impersonal. The appearance of domestic servants in the poorhouse hospital, too, reflects the women's relative isolation. Domestic servants evidently lacked the family or friends who might be able to care for them when they were sick or provide a place where they could recuperate. While some middle-class families regarded their domestic servants with some affection, it seems that generally, the women were unable to rely on their employers for help.⁸⁹ While domestic service offered Irish women some advantages, these data reveal the vulnerability of domestic servants who had a place to live only at the pleasure of their employers. Once ill and unable to perform their jobs, they had no where else to stay.

⁸⁸ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p.82.

⁸⁹As suggested by one case Gerber cites, "there were surely those Americans...who willed money to their faithful Bridget...But most were deeply discontent with Irish help." (p.140) According to Diner, the middle-class commentary on Irish domestic servants mostly focused on their "demerits," but occasionally praised the women.

Poorhouse data also reveal other dangers of domestic service. First, while "servants lived in a strikingly more healthful environment" according to Diner, than sewing women, for example, domestic service was apparently not without its health hazards.⁹⁰ (Eight of the 19 domestic servants =) Forty-two percent of the women servants died as a result of "consumption."⁹¹ Of the other women on this mortality list who declared no occupation, only (8 of 33 =) 24 percent died of consumption.⁹² Second, data from the Erie County Almshouse seem to confirm that domestics were vulnerable to sexual abuse. Several women at the Erie County Almshouse in 1850/51 identified themselves as pregnant servants. This finding recalls that writer Louisa May Alcott, after her short experience as a domestic servant, revealed "the constant sexual innuendos made by the man of the house."⁹³ The poorhouse records suggest the sexual vulnerability of women in domestic service as an occupation. Like domestic servants who were ill, pregnant servants, cast out of their homes, turned to the poorhouse, the only source of help to lying-in women who were without a place to stay, as well as knowledgeable female friends or relatives who could care for them.

Children's illness was a frequent cause of women's impoverishment and poorhouse residency. In one of Chipman's Albany cases, a woman supported herself and her children, including a "child which had been sick near five years [and] was just alive." The woman applied to the Overseer of the Poor for a load of wood to heat the stove by which the child "was bolstered up in two chairs."⁹⁴ In 1850/51, several women went to the Erie County Almshouse because of "destitution," the result of having a "sick child,"

⁹⁰ Diner, p. 90.

⁹¹ "Vital Records," .4210 or 42%.

⁹² Ibid.,.2424 or 24%.

⁹³Diner, p. 81.

⁹⁴ Chipman, p. 90.

perhaps one who could not be left or whose medical care depleted wages. Others had listed as the cause of their admittance "sick child," suggesting that they went to the poorhouse to see a physician.⁹⁵

Data from the Erie County Almshouse registers confirm the critical place of family relationships as a hedge against poverty in times of illness. Single women were more likely than women in families to go to the poorhouse as a result of impoverishment related to medical needs. The greater security of family relationships during times of illness or pregnancy is suggested by the relatively small percentages of single mothers and married women among unhealthy or pregnant women pauper inmates. Though, single mothers of small children would have been as vulnerable as childless, single women. The single women had neither husbands nor children or others upon whom they could rely for support during bouts of illness or other periods when they were physically compromised, like pregnancy or "old age."⁹⁶

The cases of married women in the poorhouse suggest that their economic status depended greatly upon the health of husbands. In none of the Erie County Almshouse cases studied was only the wife ill in a male-headed inmate family. Most of these married women accompanied ill husbands. The greater prevalence of sick couples in the poorhouse rather than those with one sick spouse, suggests, too, that ill husbands or wives were able to rely, at least, temporarily, on the earnings of the healthy spouse or children. The 1844 case of the Willox family, Janette, James and their 3-year old son, suggests that when both spouses were ill and the couple did not have children wage earners, these families, like single women, had few, if any, resources besides a stay at the poorhouse.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

⁹⁶ Table 8, "Unhealthy & Pregnant Women Pauper Inmates at the Erie County Almshouse Grouped by Family Type."

⁹⁷ Ibid.

The data show, too, that single fathers were more likely than single mothers to have to seek a stay at the poorhouse because they were ill.⁹⁸ Stated another way, single healthy fathers were less likely to than healthy single mothers to appear at the poorhouse. The case of a single father at the Erie County Almshouse in 1851/52 suggests that his arrival there was due to an unusual combination of circumstances. The father had been brought to "destitution" after he "cut his foot" and "two of his children [became] sick."⁹⁹

Evidence from the late 1840s demonstrates the economic dangers of illness for poor immigrants in particular. In 1847, a petition from the University of Buffalo Medical School to the Erie County Board of Supervisors pointed out that during the previous year, the poorhouse had received 900 "sick and infirm paupers " including about 600 foreigners," and a large proportion have been under medical treatment, including more than 100 cases of ship fever."¹⁰⁰ That so many of the poor were Catholic immigrants was reflected in the Sisters of Charity establishing a hospital in Buffalo in 1848.¹⁰¹ In 1849, the Erie County Board of Supervisors was lamenting the rise in poor relief costs, including the cost of caring for the sick poor, the majority of whom were immigrants. That year, too, Sister M. Ursala of the Sisters of Charity Hospital asked the Erie County Board of Supervisors to allow the Sisters to extend their services to the sick at the poorhouse for the same rate that it would cost to care for them there.

To the Honorable ___ Supervisors of Erie County: In behalf of suffering humanity the Sisters of Charity tender the use of their Hospital and their services to the sick poor of the city and count at the same rate (60 cents per week) at which it is said they are supported in the Poor House; the

⁹⁸ The data included only five single father families. Of these, two or 40 percent of the fathers were ill. In contrast, the data included 139 single mother families. Of these, seven or 6.5% of the single mothers were ill.

⁹⁹ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

¹⁰⁰ Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Erie County Board of Supervisors, 1847.

¹⁰¹ Gerber, p. 284.

Kindness of Divine Providence and the Charity of their fellow Citizens affording them the means of supplying whatever may be deficient in amount - Grateful for this, they will also be grateful to you. Hon Gen. [sic] for enabling them to extend the sphere of their usefulness.
Sister M. Ursul[a]¹⁰²

The Board allowed this as an option to the sick poor.

Resolved - That this Board recommend that Superintendents of the Poor of Erie County in case there are not sufficient accommodations at the Poor department to deliver to the care of the hospital of the Sisters of Charity all such sick personas as may become a county charge who may prefer to go to that institution in preference to the poorhouse of the County - provided the expense of keeping such persons shall not cost more than 60 cents per week or the amount it would cost at the county Poor H., & should any of said sick persons die at said Hospital they shall receive the same pay for burying such dead as is now paid at the Poorhouse.¹⁰³

Records of births and deaths at the Oneida County Poor House from 1829 to 1838 reveal that African-Americans used the poorhouse system but only in the most dire circumstances. While no black women gave birth there, some black men, women and children died there.¹⁰⁴ This difference in the medical uses of the Oneida County Poorhouse suggests that African-Americans resorted to the public, white-dominated relief system only when they were bereft of other options. Between 1830 and 1835, eleven African-Americans died at the Oneida County Poorhouse. The only case of an African-American applicant that Chipman recorded in Albany was "an old colored woman who was sick."¹⁰⁵

While married and unmarried, sane and insane white women gave birth at the Oneida County poorhouse during the 1830s, the absence of black births there suggests that black women relied on their own resources during childbirth. This finding is

¹⁰² Annual Meeting of the Erie County Board of Supervisors, November 21, 1849, 2 p.m.

¹⁰³ Ibid. The Board adopted the resolution with a vote of 14 to 6.

¹⁰⁴ "Births & Deaths at the County Poor House," p. 22.

¹⁰⁵ Chipman, p. 91.

supported by the deaths of very young children like 2-year old James Henry, 2-year old Jane Titus, 4-month old Mary Schooner, 18-month old William H. Demeros “ and number 101” a “black child” who was three days old.¹⁰⁶ The young children’s and babies’ deaths at the poorhouse suggest that black babies were born in the community but brought to the poorhouse when their illnesses had become most grave. This conclusion further suggests that the African-American community was relatively cohesive and could, therefore, provide services to lying-in women.

Evidence from Monroe County in the late 1840s seems to corroborate the Oneida County data suggesting that African-American women tended not to give birth at poorhouses. While less than 2 percent (or one of 35) women who gave birth at the Monroe County Poorhouse in the late 1840s were African-American, over 8 percent (or 4 of 48) women who died there were “colored.”¹⁰⁷ The one African-American woman to give birth at the Monroe County Poorhouse in the late 1840s was Lucinda Story. In April of 1849, Story gave birth to triplets at the poorhouse, Mary, Elizabeth and Henry. The Monroe County records support the argument that black women tended to use the relief system in only the most dire circumstances. While Story was the only African-American woman to give birth at the Monroe County Poorhouse between 1847 and 1849, four black women, including Story, died there during the same period. In July, 28-year old Sally Davis, a native Virginian, died of consumption. In September, 38-year old Rosanna Smith, born in New York, died of “ship fever,” as did 39-year old Elizabeth Brown of New York in December. These findings suggest that African-American women avoided white institutions as long as they could possibly do so, even when impoverished.

¹⁰⁶ “Births & Deaths at the County Poor House,” from 1829 to 1838.”

¹⁰⁷ “Vital Records,” Of the 35 women who gave birth at the Monroe County Poorhouse between 1847 and 1849, only one was African-American (.0285), while of the 48 women who died there, four were “colored” (.0833).

For white and immigrant women, one of the most common intersections between the needs of poverty relief and medical attention came with pregnancy, labor and the postpartum period. In 1843, for example, 20-year old Irish immigrant Margaret Neal arrived at the Erie County Almshouse two months before the birth of her baby and stayed several months after the infant's death. In 1829, 22-year old Lavinia Berry of New Hampshire arrived at the almshouse about seven weeks before the birth of her daughter. The Berrys left the almshouse within two days after the birth. In 1834, 22-year old Irish Ellen Dunning stayed much of the summer at the almshouse before giving birth to her daughter Mary Ann in late September. The Dunnings departed two days later. In 1844, 30-year old Irish immigrant and single mother Cathrin [sic] Take gave birth at the poorhouse while her 8-year old son Michael and 4-year old son John stayed at the Orphan Asylum. Take's newborn was soon discharged while she stayed on at the poorhouse. The case of Agnus Collins was similar. The 21-year old Canadian immigrant went to the almshouse on September 19, 1844. She had her baby on the 26th. "Child Collins" was discharged on September 27, while Collins stayed. Jane Hulbert, a 24-year old woman from Erie County went to the almshouse on July 12, 1843, and had her baby about three weeks later. In late 1854, German immigrant Mary Kroomer, 20, came to the almshouse about two months before giving birth to her baby in early 1855. Kroomer and her infant left the almshouse the same day of the birth. Single as well as married or widowed women relied on poorhouses as lying-in hospitals. Mrs. Lydia Van Jeckle, a native-born 50-year old mother of three children, ages 11, 10 and 3 gave birth to her daughter Harriet at the Erie County Almshouse after a four-month stay there.¹⁰⁸ At the Oneida County

¹⁰⁸ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

Poorhouse, Miss Polly Like, for one, had her son in 1832, and Mrs. Betsey Darling had her daughter there in 1835.¹⁰⁹

The record of one woman who gave birth at the Monroe County Poorhouse reveals her anger at her husband, the father of her newborn daughter. The birth record of baby Charlotte Mson [sic] in 1849 includes the names of her parents: "Bassterd & Julia Lee." Lee and the father were married, as indicated by the lack of the qualifier "illegitimate" in the record. The record is silent about why Lee was angry at her husband and why she gave her daughter a different surname, "Mson." What is certain was that Lee utilized the process of naming as a way of responding to the event that set her in the direction of the poorhouse.

While married and single women used poorhouses as lying-in hospitals, single pregnant women comprised the majority of these women. Data from Oneida and Monroe Counties indicates that single women represented from 57 to over 75 percent of the women who gave birth in poorhouses.¹¹⁰ These findings indicate that working-class women in general did not necessarily utilize the poorhouse as a lying-in hospital but that the poorhouse generally remained the hospital to society's most marginal and socially isolated women.

Many women at the Erie County Almshouse faced the worst poverty after they had children. This fact is suggested by the cases of women who went there with young babies. In one case in 1850/51, a pauper woman inmate went to the poorhouse as a result

¹⁰⁹ "Births & Deaths at the County Poor House," from 1829 to 1838," p. 8 and 19.

¹¹⁰ According to data from Oneida County, 35 women gave birth at the Oneida County Poorhouse between 1830 and 1835. Forty-three per cent of the women were married (15) and 57% of the women were single (20). Data from Monroe County between 1847 and 1850 suggest that single women comprised over three quarters of those who gave birth there.

of “destitution.” The cause of the destitution is revealed in the note “child five days old.”¹¹¹

CONCLUSION

While the middle-class poverty discourse was generally silent about poor women, the evidence of poor women themselves indicates the reasons for their impoverishment as well as how they used public assistance. These cases demonstrate that poverty was never far from working-class women's lives. Illness, injury, pregnancy, abandonment or the mundane occurrence of cold weather quickly spelled the difference between sustenance and destitution. Yet women were not merely passive recipients of relief outside or inside the poorhouse. Poor women's agency was apparent in their decisions to apply for and in how to utilize the relief available to them.

Chapter 4

“A Daily Martyrdom”: Women, Gender And Relief Policy In The 1850s

In 1857, a committee studying New York State poorhouses responded to a crisis in the poverty relief system that included rising relief costs and taxes, overcrowding and unhealthy conditions, as well as failure to provide for the health and education of pauper children. The 1857 state committee included this note from a state Senate document in its report:

The poor widow who has occupied a respectable position in society, and who has been accustomed to the decencies and amenities of polished, intelligent and christian society, but in consequence of pecuniary misfortune in her declining years, is compelled to resort to the poor house, finds herself seated at the table with a negro wench on one side of her and a filthy prostitute on the other. She sleeps in the same room with the degraded and the outcast, and is compelled the whole day to associate on equal terms, and to listen to the obscene and disgusting language of creatures who are utterly revolting to her feelings. Such a woman undergoes a daily martyrdom.¹

Tucked into a footnote of the 1857 "Report of the Senate Committee on Poor Houses, Work Houses, Jails and Penitentiaries", the quote illustrated the committee's argument that poorhouses suffered from a lack of categorization among inmates. The quote demonstrated the committee's point, but it has also serves as one of the rare clues about how officials in the poverty relief system regarded women, and what they understood as

the responsibility of the system toward women. The 1857 committee's report referred to the relief system throughout the state, indicating that the same problems and constructions of poor women permeated the system. In its text, subtext and silences about women, the quote offers a chance to tease out implicit relief system policy toward poor women, even if it tended to vary somewhat by county.

Evidence indicates that the belief that poorhouses were beset by a lack of inmate classification was held widely. For example, according to the committee studying the Albany County almshouse in 1853, "the grand cause of all its disgusting and loathsome appearance, has been *the want of proper arrangement and division*."² The 1857 state committee pointed out, too, that

Poor houses, if properly conducted, might be what they were originally designed to be comfortable asylums for worthy indigence. To suffer them to become unsuitable refuges for the virtuous poor, and mainly places of confinement for the degraded, is to pervert their main purpose; and the present management of them is such that decent poverty is virtually excluded until the last extremity of pauperism is reached, when the necessity of supporting mere existence compels it reluctantly to seek the scanty comforts of a poor house rather than to suffer the horrors of starvation outside.³

Stated another way, the worthy and unworthy poor should be separated. In the realm of private charity, the Buffalo Association for the Relief of the Poor shared the mission to

¹ "Report of Select Committee Appointed to Visit Charitable Institutions Supported by the State and all City and County Poor and Work Houses and Jails of the State of New York," (Albany, 1857), p. 213, note B (Senate documents 1855, No. 72).

² "Report of the Almshouse Committee on the Subject of a Reorganization of that Institution" (Albany, 1853), p. 6.

³ "Report of the Select Committee," p.6

distinguish among the worthy and unworthy poor. In 1855, the association advised its “visitors” to the poor that

the persons who will address themselves to your sympathies, though differing in many particulars, may here be divided into three classes. *First*, those who have been reduced to indigence by infirmity, sickness, old age, and unavoidable misfortune; *Second*, those who have brought themselves to want and suffering by their improvidence and vice; and *Third*, persons who are able but unwilling to labor, and are beggars and vagrants by profession. The well-being of these different classes evidently requires a mode of treatment adapted to each. And as this cannot be applied without a knowledge of their character and circumstances, your first duty is, to *withhold all relief from unknown persons*. Let this rule be imperative and unalterable.⁴

Relief reformers wanted to separate the bodies of the various "classes" of paupers, including the mentally ill, the sick and disabled, orphans and able-bodied men and women. 'Lunatics,' the sick and infirm would be better treated, while the able-bodied would be effectively controlled. Critical in this classification and segregation project was an impetus to sift out the "unworthy poor," able-bodied, or, at least, relatively healthy, poor people stereotyped as having become poor as the result of their own moral weakness. According to such classification plans, poorhouse administrators would be able to treat paupers differently.

In trying to tease out gendered policy concerning women relief recipients, the meanings of the “poor widow,” “negro wench” and “filthy prostitute” in the 1857 report begin to become clear with an analysis of ideas able-bodied male paupers. In 1853, a committee proposing to reform the Albany, New York, poorhouse observed that

persons visiting the Alms-House are touched with pity on beholding the insane, the aged, the decrepit, and the tender infant; but the sight of scores and sometimes of hundreds of stout, burly fellows, lounging about in idleness, excites only indignation.⁵

This physical categorization of poor people deemed them as legitimate or illegitimate public dependents. In decrying the "stout, burly fellows lounging about in idleness," poorhouse reformers pointed to the gender-deviant immorality that excluded poor men, and especially poor foreign and Irish Catholic men, from entitlement to public dependence. In lamenting the widow "seated...with a negro wench on one side of her and a filthy prostitute on the other," poorhouse reformers indicated a moral hierarchy of entitlement among poor women.

Poor men and women's bodies were tropes in the poorhouse discourse that represented a complex ideological understanding of the causes of industrial poverty. According to this ideology, the economy held out success in the form of economic security and independence to all able-bodied men who worked hard, while women had opportunities to achieve economic security through dependence in marriage. Within this framework, the able bodies of poor men attested to their natural moral inferiority. In contrast, the sexualized or desexualized bodies of poor women indicated their relative morality. The desexualized body of the "poor widow who has occupied a respectable position in society" indicated her moral superiority. Yet, the sexualized bodies of the

⁴ "Directory of the Buffalo Association for the Relief of the Poor" (Buffalo, 1855), p. 14.

⁵ "Report Of The Almshouse Committee," p. 9.

"negro wench and the "filthy prostitute," like the bodies of the "stout, burly fellows" embodied the moral inferiority that bred poverty.

In the 1853 report, the description "stout, burly fellows" depicted able bodies that starkly contrasted with the non-able bodies that made up the other classes of the poor. "The insane," "the aged" and "the decrepit" were all dependent bodies that could not contribute labor or sustain themselves independently. And, "the tender infant," unable to supply any of its own needs, was the genuine embodiment of dependency. These "classes" of paupers were united in their legitimate claim on public dependency. In contrast, "stout, burly fellows" had bodies that were not entitled to public support.

During the antebellum era, changing middle-class constructions of the male body reflected shifting middle-class expectations of working-class men. In 1839, Phrenologist Professor Grimes delivered a lecture to a Buffalo audience that depicted the inherent qualities associated with male brawn. "Some men have the bones and muscles large," he explained, "while the brain and the nervous system are comparatively small. Such men are more remarkable for their corporeal and animal energies than for their moral and intellectual powers...Such men are most of the laboring classes of the community at this day." According to Grimes, middle-class men were noted for their "moral and intellectual powers" while large, muscular working-class men were relatively immoral, less intelligent and noted for their uncivilized, passionate "animal energies."⁶

⁶ "Professor Grimes First Lecture on Phrenology - Concluded," *Buffalo Daily Republican*, 6 February 6, 1839, p. 2.

"The laboring class of the community at this day" to which Grimes referred was largely an immigrant working class. In the Erie Canal region, from Buffalo to Albany, immigrants, and Irish men in particular, filled unskilled jobs in canal construction, on docks, in warehouses and on boats.⁷ Beginning in the 1820s, but especially after 1845, Irish immigrants were desperately poor. Native-born Americans stereotyped Irish men as violent, disorderly and drunk. Moreover, the men were Catholic and, in Protestant terms, servile to the will of the Pope.⁸ In sum, the working class and foreign men lacked the moral characteristics of native-born middle-class men: economic and moral independence, self-control and industriousness. In Grimes' economy of male muscle, the bodies of laboring men possessed brawn but naturally lacked the moral and intellectual characteristics of middle-class manhood.

According to E. Anthony Rotundo, the 1850s saw the beginnings of a middle-class association between the muscular male body and middle-class manhood.⁹ This cultural expression was linked to the appropriation and positive value of "male passions"

⁷ Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), p. 36.

⁸ On Irish immigrants see Hasia Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986); Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁹ E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 222-223.

deemed appropriate in a competitive economy and individualistic culture.¹⁰ The 1853 Almshouse Committee Report reflects this emergent transition in the construction of the ideal manly body. In 1839, Professor Grimes did not associate muscularity with morality, however, the 1853 Almshouse Committee was indignant that the "stout, burly fellows" did not possess the moral qualities of middle-class men. In the context of the mid-century middle-class equation of male body and character, stout, burly male relief recipients presented a problem.

The "fellows" idleness indicated that they were not industrious. Worse, they were "lounging about," implying a conscious laziness when middle-class male culture explained failure with laziness.¹¹ "Lounging," too, dredged up images of indulging in luxury, a vice which middle-class manhood eschewed.¹² Furthermore, because middle-class men drew much of their masculine identity from their work, a man without work was constructed as "less than a man."¹³

In the eyes of the poorhouse reformers, the "fellows" also conveyed a sense of boyishness. The committee believed that the able-bodied male paupers enjoyed their public dependence at the poorhouse because they could "live nearly as well, with less labor and 'more fun' than they [could] when earning their own subsistence."¹⁴ The

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 227-232.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 179.

¹² Ibid., p. 239.

¹³ Ibid., p. 168.

¹⁴ "Report Of The Almshouse Committee," p. 17.

paupers' manly bodies appeared to contradict their apparent refusal to leave what Rotundo calls the boyish "world of play, a social space where one evaded the duties and restrictions of adult society."¹⁵

Equally shocking, the men seemed to lack what Kerby A. Miller has called "bourgeois concepts" like deferred gratification, acquisitiveness and frugality.¹⁶ The committee complained that in the winter, the poorhouse was "thronged with *loafers*, who waste the facilities for acquiring, and squander what money they do get during the summer."¹⁷ In fact, unemployed men did resort to county poorhouses in greater numbers during the winter because unskilled men's work in construction and agriculture was seasonal. Moreover, even when outdoor labor like canal work was relatively well paid, it was unsteady and short-lived.¹⁸ For unskilled laborers, and especially the large numbers of poor Irish Catholic immigrants among them, impoverishment punctuated livelihood. Like women and boys, the "fellows" were dependent. The Almshouse Committee aimed to reform the "fellows" by making congruent the men's physicality and gender. Forced labor in workshops, the committee imagined, would not only lighten the burden of poor relief on the taxpayers but also recreate the "fellows" as manly, independent providers.

¹⁵ Rotundo, p. 55.

¹⁶ Miller, p. 108.

¹⁷ "Report Of The Almshouse Committee," p. 17.

¹⁸ Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), p. 6; Miller, p. 194; Sheriff, p. 42.

"This will either drive these drones away," they reasoned, "or what is better, make them support themselves, and do something towards that of others."¹⁹

Of all the reform plans presented here, the only one that differentiated among men was the 1857-state plan:

The opinion is prevalent that the poor houses are asylums for the worthless and vicious only. Among the inmates, however, the committee found persons of great worth and respectable character, reduced to extreme poverty, not by any vice or fault of their own, but by some inevitable loss of property, or of friends and relatives who, if living, would have supported them in their age and infirmities. In one county, they met with a soldier who had served under Washington in the wars of the revolution, still of sound mind, and in good health; but who was until lately ignorant that he was entitled to a pension that would suffice to make the residue of this life comfortable outside of a poor house.²⁰

The 1857 state committee reserved special sympathy for downwardly mobile men, those who had suffered some "inevitable loss of property," or through loss of access to support by "friends and relatives" who could have afforded their dependence. In the case of the Revolutionary War veteran, his military service also made him worthy. These types of poor men were evidently worthy and respectable, in contrast to the "prevalent opinion" of poorhouses as "asylums for the worthless and vicious only."

For Protestants, resolving poverty demanded shaming and punishing public dependents because Protestant ideology fused destitution with criminality. As the 1857 committee explained,

¹⁹ "Report Of The Almshouse Committee," p. 9.

²⁰ "Report Of The Select Committee," p. 6.

although pauperism is not in itself a crime, yet that kind of poverty which ends in a poor house, unless it is the result of disease, infirmity, or age, producing a positive inability to earn a livelihood, is not unusually the result of such self-indulgence, unthrift, excess, or idleness, as is next of kin to criminality.²¹

Reform plans reflected this ideology. In considering a solution, the 1853 committee verbalized two extreme public views and offered a middle course.

There are various opinions among our citizens in relation to the proper management of Alms-Houses. Some, believing that they only tend to increase pauperism, would have them made as repulsive as possible, so as to prevent the poor from wishing to go there. This reasoning assumes that the poor are such from *choice* rather than *necessity*, and that a home at the Alms-House is not their only alternative—a very erroneous idea, in many cases. The number of those who make this their only home *from choice*, is comparatively small. Let us not, therefore, be too ready to censure these paupers indiscriminately, for we thereby do great injustice to many worthy but unfortunate persons, whose only crime may be that of being poor." (035-p5-6) On the other hand, "others...think that such institutions should be thrown open to all, and that all who choose to do so, should be encouraged to enter them...They would have every application for temporary or permanent relief granted at once, and without any examination into the circumstances of the case. But past experience shows that the most outrageous frauds and impositions have been practiced upon the community as well as upon overseers, and that indiscriminate almsgiving, whether by individuals or public authorities, only tends increase the evil, and encourage laziness and improvidence."²²

The committee offered a solution: "The true course doubtless lies between these two extremes...(035-P6)

²¹ Ibid., p. 7.

²² "Report Of The Almshouse Committee," p.6.

in making our Alms-Houses as comfortable and pleasant as possible to those who are driven there by *sickness, old age, misfortune, or infirmity*; but to the idle drones who go there because they are too lazy or improvident to support themselves elsewhere, let them indeed be made a terror.²³

The committees believed that "classification" or segregation of the inmates was the key to solving the poorhouse problem. As the Rochester Daily Union asked, "what shall be done with the poor? In order that we may arrive at correct conclusions these must be classified. We would make the following divisions:- 1st. The insane poor. 2d. The sick and idiotic. 3d. The children."²⁴ They planned to separate the bodies of the various "classes" of paupers, including the mentally ill, the sick and disabled and orphan children, as well as able-bodied men and women. "Lunatics," the sick and infirm would be better treated, while the able-bodied would be effectively controlled. Critical in this classification project was an impetus to sift out the "unworthy poor," able-bodied, or, at least, relatively healthy, poor people stereotyped as having become poor as the result of their own moral weakness.

The Union proposed that

Having disposed of the children, the sick, the idiotic and the insane, the number left of idle men and women, able to labor but two [sic] lazy, who will not support themselves, should one and all be put late (?) the work house, where they can render service to the county that shall produce a revenue fully equal to the cost of their support.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Rochester Daily Union*, November 20, 1855, 3-2.

This plan would “dispose of the present inmates of the poor house.”²⁵ One solution offered by the Oneida County Supervisors of the Poor was

A 'Work House,' judiciously located and conducted, it is confidently believed, would check to a very great extent the necessities now existing for the granting of temporary relief and it is confidently presumed, based upon the experience of those counties where such establishments already exist, that the interest of the tax-payers of the county would be greatly advanced by a profitable employment of the county paupers, and such other person made amenable to the law, for vagrancy or misdemeanors.²⁶

The 1857 state committee suggested that

a still more efficient and economical auxiliary in supporting the poor, and in the prevention of absolute pauperism, consists, in the opinion of the committee, in the proper and systematic distribution of *out door* relief. Worthy indigent persons should, if possible, be kept from the degradation of the poor house, by reasonable supplies of provisions, bedding, and other absolute necessities, at their own homes. Half the sum requisite for their maintenance in the poor house would often save them from destitution, and enable them to work in the their households and their vicinity, sufficiently to earn the remainder of their support during the inclement season when indigence suffers the most, and when it is most likely to be forced into the common receptacles of pauperism, whence it rarely emerges without a loss of self-respect and a sense of degradation...The present provisions of law seem to be inadequate and ill-suited to the purpose.²⁷

Reformers' plans for reforming relief recipients and the poorhouse illustrated Protestant notions of poverty as criminal and immoral that underlay the poor relief system. Thus, the 1853 committee's plan stipulated the segregation of inmates as well as

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Journal of the Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Oneida, at their Annual Meeting in November and December, 1853” (Utica, 1853), p.20.

the forced-work program. Males and females would be housed in single-sex dormitories, and adults and children would live on separate floors, family ties notwithstanding. Of critical importance was the plan to erode poor mothers' and fathers' familial authority by separating parents and children. Spatially emphasizing the centrality of work in the punishment and reform of the inmates, the dormitories would attach directly to workshops. Moreover, the committee planned to fortify its program by enclosing the entire compound to prevent escape.²⁸

Native-born, Protestant middle-class relief reformers' image of the poor included drunkenness, foreign birth and Catholicism. According to the 1853 Albany committee, the overcrowding of the poorhouse was caused mainly by "the great number of emigrants with which it has been flooded, and who, in addition to their abject poverty, have brought disease of almost every conceivable kind with them."²⁹ In Oneida County, too, in 1853, the Superintendents of the poorhouse reported that they had "great difficulty in controlling the expenditure for temporary relief...One active cause is clearly chargeable to the very great influx of emigrants."³⁰ And, as the 1857 committee added, "the most fertile source of pauperism, lunacy, and crime as all statistics respecting these evils show, is intemperance."³¹ As Irish and German immigrants comprised the bulk of relief

²⁷ "Report Of The Select Committee," p. 5.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁹ "Report Of The Almshouse Committee," p.6.

³⁰ "Journal of the Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Oneida, at their Annual Meeting in November and December, 1853" (Utica, 1853), p.20.

³¹ "Report Of The Select Committee," p. 17.

recipients in the Erie Canal region, and their cultures included the drinking of alcohol, this "fertile source" of poverty was the foreign-born population. The 1853 Albany Almshouse Committee noted, too, "the reluctance, with which our native-born paupers resort to poorhouses, " while the "stout, burly fellows," presumably foreigners and Irish Catholics appeared to enjoy their stay there.³²

While county officials focused increasingly on the fact that most relief recipients in the Erie Canal region were foreign born, data from Erie County suggests that native-born and foreign-born paupers would be differentiated and contrasted. In 1850/51, inmates born in the U.S. began to be labeled as "American" rather than by state of birth. In September of 1850, for example, William Fitch, inmate number 176, was listed as American, while Sophia Deemer, inmate number 1749, was listed as born in Massachusetts. "American" soon became the standard nativity for native-born, white inmates.³³ In 1852/53, infants born at the Erie County Almshouse began to be labeled with the nativity of their foreign-born mothers. In 1854/55, for instance, infants Darner, Gannon and Vizert were born at the poorhouse and assigned the nativities German, Irish and Irish, respectively, while infant Stimpson was labeled American.³⁴ This development in the Erie County poorhouse registers marks the era when American society was characterized by "a new ethnic geography."³⁵ Evidently, differences in the

³² "Report Of The Almshouse Committee," p. 5.

³³ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

³⁴ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

³⁵ Knobel, p. 45

birthplaces of native-born paupers were not as important to officials as national differences.

Poor Department records from the early 1850s reveal that the nature of "nativity" began to change as "nativity" began to mean race. For example, in 1852, the Rochester Daily Union printed 1851-52 temporary relief statistics compiled by the Overseer of the City Poor. In a list of relief recipients and their place of nativity, French and Canadians were counted together, perhaps because they were united by language. "Africans" were last on the list.³⁶ According to James Oliver Horton, some Africans did migrate to the United States during the antebellum era. It is most likely, however, that the 101 black relief recipients in Rochester were almost all, if not entirely, African-Americans, not Africans.³⁷ Thus, the black recipients were grouped by African ancestry, not birth. Evidence from Rochester, then, suggests that the black poor, if not African-Americans generally, were as "foreign" as the Irish or other poor immigrants.

At the Erie County Almshouse, the Keeper indicated instances of racial mixture evident in African-American children. One-year old Elisabeth Wheaton, number 330, for example, appears in the register as "Mulatto," while her mother, Margaret Wheaton was listed as Irish. In 1855/56, Leah Gross, number 1087, was listed as Irish while her 3-month old daughter, Mary Ellen was Mulatto. In 53/54, number 1325, Hannah Bryan, recorded as Irish, came to the poorhouse with her 3-year old daughter, Margaret, a

³⁶ "Statistics of Pauperism," *Rochester Daily Union*, December 14, 1852, 2-3.

³⁷ James Oliver Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African-American Community*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993) p. 27.

mulatto. In 1855-56, infant Merady, born at the poorhouse, was mulatto. Her mother was listed as "Colored." Unlike the children of European immigrants, African-American children were classified separately from their mothers by color.³⁸ These cases suggest that African-Americans were the most "foreign" of the racially different poor. According to the poorhouse records, African-Americans, from the perspective of whites, existed outside of national boundaries.

Until 1849, Erie County Almshouse keepers did not indicate the color of inmates, though place of birth was of great importance.³⁹ By the 1850s, however, race in the Erie County Poorhouse had become significant enough to indicate black inmates, even though their numbers were small. The recording of African-American poorhouse inmates demonstrated that color was more important than place of birth.

In Erie County, the lack of a policy about how to categorize African-American inmates by race and nativity is apparent in early 1852/53 register entries. For example, on November 1, 1852, 40-year old cook Benjamin Lewis was listed as "Ohio Colored." About a week later, 5-year old Priscilla Carter arrived at the poorhouse and was labeled

³⁸ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

³⁹ One might conclude that the Erie County Almshouse housed no African-American inmates until 1849, but this conclusion would be untenable. The sparse, remaining records of the Monroe County Almshouse in Rochester and the Oneida County Almshouse in Rome reveal that black men and women used those poorhouses. However, those records pertain to poorhouse marriages, deaths and births. Poorhouse keepers in those counties may have believed that color was vital information in those cases, particularly in the cases of death because cemeteries were usually segregated. The Erie County Almshouse Registers, however, suggest that class was the primary factor in recording admittance to the poorhouse.

"American Colored." A month later, 35 year-old Kesiv Mosby, a vagrant, was listed as "Canada Colored." The seven subsequent African-Americans to register at the almshouse were listed as "Colored" without a place of nativity. Later in the year, however, James Johnson, a 42-year old sailor who went to the poorhouse for the treatment of sore legs, was listed as "Connecticut Colored." The inconsistency of the entries suggests that the recording of African-American inmates primarily by color was novel and that poorhouse keepers and their staffs had not yet learned to think of black inmates primarily in terms of racial categories. Continuing to record the nativity of black inmates suggested that, in contrast to the Rochester data, some whites, at least, considered African-Americans to be within the American community.⁴⁰

By 1853-54, however, Erie County Almshouse keepers had learned to think of the black poor as existing outside of American identity. For the duration of the decade, African-American inmates' nativity was almost always listed as Colored, Mulatto or Negro without a place of birth.⁴¹ The 1853/54 Erie County Almshouse Keeper's annual report was the first to account for the number of colored inmates in a list of inmates' countries: "Americans, Germans, Irish, English, French, Norwegians, Colored, Scotch, Canadians, Hungarians, Indians, Welsh, Bohemians, Belgians and Swedes." In the 1856

⁴⁰ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

⁴¹The exception to this pattern was number 1020, 36-year old Charles Bates, a "Virginia Slave." While Bates' race is indicated in small print above his name, color was not indicated as part of his nativity, nor did it have to be. "Slave" inherently meant "black." In 1857-58, nine African-Americans were listed as "U.S. (colored)" or "Col'd U.S." rather than just "Colored." These entries may reflect the immigration of black Carribeans or other people of African origins.

report, the tabulations of Colored inmates and (American) Indian inmates were separate from and listed last after Americans, Irish, Germans, French, Canadians, Scotch and English groups of inmates. In the 1857 report, "colored persons" were included among those listed by native country, but in a separate section of the report were counted together at 24. In the 1850s, color trumped nativity in the white construction of poor African-Americans.⁴²

In the cases of immigrants and blacks, by about 1850, racial categories were more important in the relief system than they had been previously. This finding jibes with Knobel's conclusion that in the last years of the antebellum era, "public officials intent upon uncovering the sources of urban poverty, crime, and disease, began to recant openly the environmental explanations of social evils accepted for decades and to adopt an 'ethnological' approach."⁴³

In Western New York, some Protestant charity organizations refused to aid the Catholic poor. In Rochester, the Rochester Orphan Asylum Association and the Home for Friendless and Virtuous Females "chose to banish the working-class Catholics from their houses of refuge" and Catholic priests, too, were denied access to these institutions. Hewitt comments that "This was a specific change in policy, written into the bylaws of the two associations and revealing a departure from the more ecumenical spirit of their

⁴² Erie County Almshouse Registers.

⁴³ Knobel, p.90

early years.”⁴⁴ In Buffalo, according to Gerber, “private Protestant charities, the various church societies, and the orphanage, women’s industrial school, and public dispensary catered largely or exclusively to American Protestants.”⁴⁵

Evidence from the Buffalo Association for the Relief of the Poor suggests that when a Protestant charity did not explicitly discriminate against Catholics, it could do so through other means. Its philosophy sprung from a suspicion of the poor that invited denying charity to many. The goal of each visitor was to “carefully investigate all cases referred to them before granting relief.” The Association instructed the visitors to “be especially careful to do all that a cautious and discriminating judgement may suggest, to prevent every abuse of the charity you may dispense.”⁴⁶ According to the Association’s “Visitor’s Manual,” the “first principle” of the Association was “the admission that the alms of benevolent societies, and of private liberality, are often misapplied, and are often abused by those who receive them.”⁴⁷ Visitors were charged with the responsibility of assessing the condition and habits of the needy, as well as their “means of subsistence.”⁴⁸ Implicitly, this responsibility meant that the Visitors would serve to police the poor

⁴⁴ According to Nancy Hewitt, “The influx of large numbers of immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s sharpened class issues for some activist women.” Hewitt, p. 237.

⁴⁵ Gerber points out that Catholics per se were not the only losers among Buffalo’s potential charity recipients. “Protestants gave a great deal more thought and effort to reform of the individual character than to charity and institutionalized public welfare” a tendency that also adversely affected the Protestant American poor. See Gerber, pp. 311-312.

⁴⁶ “Directory of the Buffalo Association for the Relief of the Poor,” p. 13.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.12.

insofar as identifying and reporting the names of those “who may be receiving adequate relief from other sources.”⁴⁹

As Gerber comments in his discussion of the Buffalo Association for the Relief of the Poor, the organization was “deviled by the effort to separate the worthy from the unworthy poor.”⁵⁰ Yet, Catholic immigrants could easily be categorized as unworthy poor. First, Irish and German use of alcohol bespoke their “intemperance.” In 1855, for example, the Association instructed its “visitors” to the poor to aid “suffering fellow creatures” in obtaining help “from resources within themselves.” “To effect this,” the Association instructed, “show them the true origin of their sufferings, when these sufferings are the result of imprudence, extravagance, idleness, intemperance, or other immoral cause[s]...”⁵¹ Second, transience marked the lives of many working-class people, especially the poorest. The Association, too, instructed its “visitors” to “withhold all relief from unknown persons. Let this rule be imperative and unalterable.”⁵²

Poverty relief administrators also embraced anti-Catholicism in an equation of Catholics and the growth of poverty. According to John O’Grady in Catholic Charities in the U.S.: History and Problems, before the Civil War Protestantism was the only religion that the inmates of almshouses were permitted to practice. Catholic services in any form were religiously excluded from these institutions. Priests were not even admitted in case of sickness and death. As a matter of course almshouses placed out all children in

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁰ Gerber, p. 311.

⁵¹ “Directory of the Buffalo Association for the Relief of the Poor,” p.14.

Protestant homes.⁵³ O'Grady adds that the Immaculate Conception Conference of Albany sent one of its members to teach catechism in the Almshouse on Sundays but "the bigotry caused by know-Nothingism brought about the request that the Society discontinue such visits."⁵⁴

Native-born efforts to reform the poverty relief system were framed by the rise of anti-Catholic sentiment. David Gerber posits that "the American bourgeoisie was usually incapable, or at best painfully slow, to organize private responses to the social problems around it, especially when immigrants were the sufferers."⁵⁵ According to Kerby A. Miller,

Frightened by the growth of what seemed to be a permanently impoverished proletariat, the nation's upper and middle classes adopted increasingly harsh attitudes toward unskilled laborers, whose failure to rise in a purportedly open and egalitarian society could now be "explained" conveniently by reference to their predominantly Irish origins, Catholic religion, and intemperate and unruly habits. Cultural antipathies often so reinforced economic cleavages as to preclude even the most elemental forms of justice or charity.⁵⁶

As Maureen Fitzgerald has shown, the Catholic understanding of poverty sharply contrasted with the harsh and punitive Protestant system. In Catholic ideology, the poor

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ John O'Grady, Ph.D., LL.D, *Catholic Charities in the US: History and Problems* (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Charities, 1930), p.235.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.241

⁵⁵ Gerber, pp.311-312

⁵⁶ Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) p. 322.

were a natural and perpetual segment of society, not the result of moral failings, and they were entitled to the help of those who were more fortunate. The Protestant ideology of poverty and the methods that applied it were not only problematic but painful for the Catholic community, particularly in Protestants breaking up poor Catholic families and converting Catholic children. The Catholic Church, and especially Irish-Catholic nuns, established an activist network for provisioning the poor, as well as protecting them from the breaking up of families and the conversion of children. According to Dolan, "the most visible and impressive aspect of the Catholic response to the social problems of the age was the founding of hospitals and orphanages." The Church also provided charity, shelter, provisions and medical care. As Dolan describes it, "the most obvious reason for the Catholic crusade of charity was the need of the people. Poverty, sickness, and death were frequent visitors to working-class neighborhoods."⁵⁷ Institutions made available to poor women were the work of women religious. In 1854, the Sisters of Charity expanded their Buffalo hospital services and established their Asylum for Widows, Lying-in Women, and Foundlings.⁵⁸

While the Catholic Church organized to assist the poor of Western New York, the Catholic press argued against the Protestant view of poverty and the poor. That the Buffalo Catholic Sentinel was concerned with the Irish specifically is demonstrated by its regular reporting of news from Ireland. In discussing Catholic orphans, the Sentinel

⁵⁷ Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 1985) p. 324.

wrote that "No one will sympathize with them unless it be those of their own nation or faith."⁵⁹ The Sentinel pointed out, too, the vulnerability of the Catholic poor because "wealthy Catholics are scarce in the Diocese."⁶⁰ Connecting poverty and class politics, the Sentinel warned that the industrial social classes found in England were emerging in the U.S., and that "the poor have changed masters."⁶¹

As a newspaper addressing the interests of Catholics, the Sentinel printed the 1857 "Report of the Senate Committee on Poor Houses, Work Houses, Jails and Penitentiaries" on the front page of the paper. This report and topic were of special interest to Catholics, and, especially, Irish Catholics, because they comprised the majority of the inmates of New York's poorhouses and prisons. In response to the 1857 report and at other times as well, the Sentinel published comparisons between the Protestant relief system and "Catholic Works of Charity," arguing for the superiority of Catholic charities. According to the Sentinel, "the holy influence of persons devoted to a life of self-sacrifice can soften and elevate the most abandoned of human creatures." Yet, while Protestant charity women were celebrated, "no fuss [was] made about about [Catholic nuns,] their meek and silent heroism at the sick bed, and on the battle field, and their death as martyrs

⁵⁸ "Report of the Buffalo Asylum," *Buffalo Catholic Sentinel* January 26, 1856.

⁵⁹ "The Orphans," *Ibid.*, November, 7, 1857 p.2

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ "How the Church Acts on the Country," *Ibid.*, March 22, 1856, p.1.

of Christ, are things to[o] common in the Church of God, as to be scarcely noticed except on High."⁶²

In response to the 1857 state report, the *Sentinel* referred to "merrie England," the land of Saints, then eminently the land of tender charity and universal benevolence" transformed by "the cold spirit of Protestantism, and the worship of mammon, which it ever introduces." Furthermore,

among the many feelings roused by the stirring events of the present day, none are so deep or so diffused as those which have made men sensible that a reform of our public charitable institutions is imperative. And that the machinery hitherto brought to bear on the amelioration of our poor population, is insufficient for its purpose. Such an opinion is no new one to Catholics whose vivid remembrance of English history in bygone days, and whose acquaintance with the habits and custom of Catholic countries; in a word whose knowledge of the *remedy* has made them fully aware of the enormity of the *evil* which even a casual visit to public institutions will present; but far beyond the Catholic Church has the feeling extended; among every body of professing Christians its expression has been heard, and it swells each day with a louder tone.⁶³

Moreover, the *Sentinel* argued that Protestantism was not the solution to poverty:

Protestantism cannot correct it, for it boasts of material successes, and points to the wealth of its members as the proof of its divine mission.. Poverty exists nevertheless, and Our Lord declare: 'The poor you have always with you.' ⁶⁴

⁶² "The State Charities," *Ibid.*, January 24 1857 pp.1-2. The *Sentinel* was discussing "Mrs. Fry," as an example of Protestant women reknowned for their charity work.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ "The State Charities," *Ibid.*, January 24, 1857, pp. 1-2; "The Report of the Select Committee &c. and Catholic Works of Charity Contrasted" June 6, 1857, p. 1.

In another issue, the Sentinel suggested how “poverty, as viewed from the Catholic stand-point,” related to gender.⁶⁵ That a Catholic construction of masculinity was disconnected from constructions of male independence was shown in a discussion of manliness, poverty and citizenship.

We know that no American citizen will for a moment admit that poverty, of itself, should be considered as an impediment to the full enjoyment of our common rights. This will not be said, for the theory of our government is against such a declaration.

We say...that the Catholic doctrine concerning poverty is the means whereby the dignity of the poor man may be sustained, and the equality of his citizenship maintained in its integrity. We have the evidence of this power in the unwavering fidelity with which the Church has supported the rights of the poor...The Catholic Church ennobles poverty. She exalts its voluntary acceptance, and stamps it with the seal of her approbation. She extracts from it the sting and urges on her members to bear it, resolutely, patiently, joyfully, manfully.⁶⁶

The Catholic assertion of manliness in poverty suggested an alternative understanding of the causes of poverty and the reluctance to construct men's ablebodiedness as a marker of moral inferiority.

In another piece, Sr. Rosaline Brown of the Sisters of Charity conveyed how “poverty, as viewed from the Catholic stand-point” related to women. According to Brown, Catholic charities’ “policy” concentrated to a greater extent than did Protestantism on women as individuals, not as actual, potential or theoretical dependents.

⁶⁵ “How the Church Acts on the Country,” *Ibid.*, March 22, 1856 p.1, Reprinted from the *New York Freeman's Journal*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

For example, Brown depicted women as individuals living outside of dependent domesticity and as connected to a larger social economy. In an announcement in the Sentinel about the Sisters of Charity opening a maternity hospital in Buffalo, Brown connected women's destitution to the larger structural forces in urbanization, population mobility and commerce. "Such an institution is eminently necessary, in so great a thoroughfare as Buffalo," she wrote.⁶⁷ In a later piece, she indicated that such an institution was needed in a major city like Buffalo: "many...have longed to see an institution of this kind established in the 'Queen City of the Lake.'" In connecting this discussion to an institution for women, she suggests the large numbers of women traveling through the Erie Canal corridor in hopes of creating for themselves a better life, perhaps out West. She called Buffalo a

populous city, which has become "the meeting of the ways, not only for the rich and poor aspirants who pass westward to the "land of promise" but also for the sad and almost broken-hearted, who with disappointed hopes return eastward to the home of their youth...Buffalo has special need of such an institution, without which distress and suffering not easily to be described, must await the poor traveler, who is near her time, and about to bear the penalty, "In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children." Sr. Rosaline and the Sisters of Charity saw the plight of poor women and children as part of the same structural problems, while Protestants often separated the two groups.. Referring to poor pregnant women, foundlings and poor widows, she posited that "those three eminent and holy charities naturally blend in one blessed work." .⁶⁸

Yet, according to the 1857 state committee, there were distinctions among poor women. The "poor widow," "negro wench" and "filthy prostitute" were stratified by

⁶⁷ Ibid., April 26, 1856 p.2.

worthiness and entitlement. In the white, middle-class ideological understanding of poverty, black female bodies were sexualized, marking poor free black women as illegitimately dependent. The "negro wench" was an inherently sexual and degrading representation of African-American women that, according to John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, "merged racial and sexual ideology."⁶⁹ The term "wench" conjured up images of uncontrolled and public female sexuality, while "wenching" was male adventure in "casual, recreational sex."⁷⁰ The body of the "negro wench" had its origins in the slave system in which white men owned the bodies of black women and sexually exploited them.⁷¹ White men justified the sexual exploitation of black women as necessary in the protection of pure white womanhood.⁷²

Moreover, free black women were sexually stigmatized through their need to labor in the public sphere. A small black middle-class excepted, black families could not afford to trade women's earnings for domesticity. Like men, free black women had to labor for cash. They could not fulfill the role of womanhood that was critical in the

⁶⁸ "Report of the Buffalo Asylum," *Ibid.*, January 26, 1856 p.2.

⁶⁹ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 86.

⁷⁰ D'Emilio and Freedman, p. 95.

⁷¹ On women, slavery and sexuality see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969); Deborah Gray White, *Ain't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985).

⁷² D'Emilio and Freedman, p. 94.

construction of white, middle-class culture.⁷³ In sum, the "negro wench" was unfit for legitimate dependence.

Despite the report's emphasis on black women as poorhouse inmates, African-American women comprised only a tiny minority of relief recipients throughout the antebellum era. Data from the Erie County, New York, Poorhouse are suggestive. Between October 1856 and October 1857, there were 12 black females among the 1,093 inmates. According to Mimi Abramovitz, whites generally considered African-Americans the most undeserving of the poor. Poor free black women and men turned to their own networks for help.⁷⁴ Yet, the body of the unworthy poor black woman loomed large in the poorhouse of the white, middle-class imagination, out of proportion with the small presence of African-American women.

Like the "negro wench," prostitutes, too, were illegitimate dependents as a result of their sexuality outside of marriage and their visibility in the public sphere. And, like black women, prostitutes seemed to protect the purity of white, middle-class ladies by drawing off what Leonore Davidoff terms "the distasteful waste products of male lustfulness." In Victorian culture, the bodies of prostitutes were constructed as "filthy"

⁷³ See Mimi Abramovitz, "The Industrial Family Ethic, White Working-Class Women, and Women of Color," in *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present* (Boston: Southend Press, 1988), pp. 118-124; on women and the "Cult of True Womanhood," see Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 189.

⁷⁴ Abramovitz, p. 90.

sources of "physical and moral contagion."⁷⁵ Like most free black women, too, prostitutes were working-class women who traded labor for cash. They were public women whose bodies performed a commercial function.

According to Davidoff, bourgeois culture constructed non-elites in degrading physical imagery while the bodily functions of the middle-class, and sexuality in particular, were hidden.⁷⁶ Thus, physical imagery was critical in conveying the deviance of the "negro wench" and "filthy prostitute," two animal-like "creatures." These bodily images of working-class women cannot be disentangled from sexuality. In sharp contrast, the widow was body-less, pure, "christian" spirit.⁷⁷ She was described only by locating her within material and cultural conditions outside of her body: she "occupied a respectable position" and was "accustomed to the decencies and amenities of polished, intelligent and christian society."

The tragedy of the former middle-class widow was not poverty but that she was divested of her power over non-whites and the working-class. She was forced to live intimately with socially inferior women. In the poorhouse, she sat, ate and slept publicly, physical activities that used to take place in the privacy of her middle-class parlor, dining room and bedroom. No longer a dominant power in these spaces, the

⁷⁵ Leonore Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1979), p. 89.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90

⁷⁷ Cott, p. 189.

widow was "compelled to associate on equal terms" with "revolting creatures" who, outside of the poorhouse, occupied different social and physical space.

According to the 1857 committee, then, all working-class able-bodied women who resorted to the poorhouse were suspect sexually. As working-class women, they could not practice the dependent domesticity required of middle-class women. Moreover, most female poorhouse inmates were Irish Catholic, women who tended to marry later than other women.⁷⁸ Their poverty or their choices to remain unmarried necessitated their work in the public sphere, their relative independence of men, and thus their sexual deviance. If poor Irish women were neither "negro wenches" nor "filthy prostitutes," they did embody a racially and morally inferior construction of womanhood that overlapped with these two categories.

The description of the widow, too, is specific in that it specifies a particular class of widow:

the poor widow who has occupied a respectable position in society, and who has been accustomed to the decencies and amenities of polished, intelligent and christian society, but in consequence of pecuniary misfortune in her declining years, is compelled to resort to the poor house.

This description disqualifies relatively young, working-class and Catholic widows from the pool of worthy female relief recipients.

That at least some women and men understood that they could use "widowhood" as a form of agency in a limited field of economic opportunities for women was shown in

⁷⁸ Diner, p. 46. On nineteenth century Irish women in Ireland and America generally, see Diner. (Routledge, 1995). On anti-Catholicism, see Knobel.

several cases of fraud. In 1858, the Rochester Union & Advertiser reported that, at least three women had posed as widows with children. In “Notes of an Overseer of the Poor,” the poormaster wrote that “Having seen in the paper recently an account of a lady travelling through the country, pretending to be looking for a brother, I send you the following extracts from my notes. I am inclined to think this sister belongs to the same class of impostors.”

Widow Element Atwater was a lady from Williamsport, Ohio, or at least so represented, having three children, which she had left at home and was on her way to some place near Newburg to get a sum of money that had been left her as a legacy by a deceased relative; that in coming from Buffalo in the cars she had been robbed by some pick pocket of sixteen dollars, being all that she posses; and not only the money, but her ticket, which she had purchased through to Albany, was gone and the conductor had very kindly passed her [to] Rochester; and in calling on persons for aid, she had been directed to me to furnish her the means to go on her journey. _____ her story as much as to say it was a humbug, yet thinking it might be best, I gave her an order for a ticket for a short distance on the cars. This she did not like, as money was the object; and so it proved, as she did not use the [ticket], as I afterwards ascertained.

The poormaster continued, saying that a woman with a similar story had made herself known about a month later: “She had been robbed of a purse, containing her money and ticket to Buffalo” and she had gone to obtain “a sum of money, the avails of a legacy, with which she was returning to their fatherless children.”⁷⁹ In these cases, a woman attempting to collect charity had represented herself in relation to a man. The women understood the meaning of “poor widow” as a legitimate object of charity and public sympathy.

These cases also indicate, however, that suspicions of poor widows continued to rise. If widows had ever enjoyed a special status as worthy objects of charity, that status was eroding by the 1850s. Only the downwardly-mobile, middle-class widow was a worthy public dependent. Her worthiness was validated by her adherence to middle-class gender roles including (former) dependence on a man, whiteness, private sexuality and, by extension, moral superiority. Poverty relief reinstated her right to domesticity, propping up her legitimate dependence.

While “poor widows,” “negro wenches” and “filthy prostitutes” seemed to constitute at least some of the women in poorhouses, the 1857 note was silent about others, especially single, pregnant women who used the poorhouse as a lying-in hospital. An ordinance passed in Niagara County in 1854, however, offers a clue about the middle-class construction of poor pregnant single women.

Resolved that in cases of Bastardy the Justice[s] of the Peace before whom such cases are brought are hereby required upon conviction of the person so charged to levy such sum or sums of money as may be sufficient to keep the female making such complaint proper as a woman should be kept in the like case. And it is further resolved that all overseers of the Poor or Superintendents of the Poor of the County of Niagara are hereby required in cases as above mentioned they shall expend such sum or sums of money as may be awarded to such female without her being compelled to go to the county poorhouse: that she shall not be compelled to be a pauper as long as such money may last – awarded by such Justice, that such moneys so awarded to such Overseers or Superintendent of the Poor as an indemnity for the county shall be paid to the order of such female at the time of her confinement or during such confinement or at any time thereafter.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ “Notes of an Overseer of the Poor,” *Rochester Union & Advertiser*, March 13, 1858.

⁸⁰ See Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Niagara County Supervisors, December 13, 1854.

The resolution indicated that the Niagara County Superintendents of the Poor would become involved in bringing bastardy cases before Justices of the Peace when pregnant women made “such complaints.” The fine paid to the Superintendents “upon conviction of the person so charged” would then be awarded by the Superintendents to the pregnant woman to prevent her from “being compelled to go to the county poorhouse.”

The new Niagara County ordinance indicated that unmarried pregnant women represented a special case of pauperism. According to the Niagara County Supervisors, a pregnant woman should be properly “kept;” she should not “be compelled to be a pauper.” The resolution suggests the Supervisors’ frustration with the men who were not providing for the “keeping” of the pregnant women. The Niagara County Supervisors also indicated that the poorhouse was not a “proper” space for a pregnant woman and that pauperism was not a “proper” condition for a pregnant woman. While poorhouses were places where diseases spread quickly, contributing to the high infant mortality rate, the committee did not mention health concerns in their resolution. Their focus was on the gendered and classed concept of “proper.”

The Supervisors admitted their understanding of the poorhouse as a place of impropriety, a place that pregnant women should be kept from by the support of men. In the antebellum ideology of womanhood, illegitimately pregnant women were the sexual victims of men. Yet the committee’s concern seemed to stop short of attempting to keep single mothers out of the poorhouse, an improper environment notwithstanding.

Thus, the Supervisors believed that they should collect fines from fathers and use them to keep pregnant women out of the poorhouse, at home. Maintaining a woman in the home was integral to the concept of manhood. The Supervisors seemed to be invested in keeping pregnant women out of the poorhouse, not in an effort to collect fines – which could be collected whether the woman stayed at the poorhouse or not. In this sense, the Supervisors aimed to fulfill for unmarried pregnant women the role of the male provider, at least, temporarily. That they would become involved in compelling the father to provide support cast the county government into a paternal role. Moreover, this paternal role was fulfilled by forcing fathers to pay a fine, not in devising a plan to keep single mothers out of the poorhouse.

The problem of illegitimate births in the poorhouse extended beyond Niagara County. In 1850, the Superintendents of the Poor of Oneida County listed in their accounts a credit for \$100.73 “by amount of money received for the support of illegitimate children.”⁸¹ This title for the category explained fully the source of the money. Yet, soon, the category title was shortened to “bastardy,” suggesting that the process behind this credit in the poor department’s balance sheet and the reason for it had become commonplace. In 1853, “money received for the support of illegitimate children” was reduced to “bastardy” and combined with other credits as “Sale of property, Bastardy, & c.”⁸² In the following year, 1854, the credit for collected funds

⁸¹ *Journal of Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Oneida at their Annual Meeting in November and December*, (Utica, 1850), p.21.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1853, p.17.

appeared as “bastardy, &c.”⁸³ The revised title suggested that the Superintendents of the Poor of Oneida County were more focused on the births of illegitimate children than other sources of collected funds. “Bastardy” had become the mainstay of the category and in the same year that the Oneida County poorhouse had the highest number of births – 17 – that it had between 1847 and 1856.⁸⁴ This was the same year that Niagara County resolved to keep unmarried pregnant women out of the poorhouse by routing bastardy fines to them.

Yet while 1854 saw the highest number of poorhouse births in Oneida County, poorhouse newborns still represented only a small percentage of poorhouse residents. Between 1847 and 1856, the percentage of infants born in the Oneida almshouse fluctuated between about one and two percent of poorhouse inmates. These figures are corroborated by data from the Erie County Almshouse where babies born represented, too, about one or two percent of the poorhouse population.⁸⁵ If the number of poorhouse births had not actually risen, administrators’ concerns may have stemmed from an ideological labeling of poorhouse births as a problem.

That antebellum society in Western New York was increasingly concerned about the failure of young men to marry and support pregnant women was shown in an 1857 article in the Rochester Union & Advertiser. The title, “Another Seduction Case,” points to an increasing concern, if not incidence, of illegitimate pregnancy not being legitimized

⁸³ Ibid., 1854, p. 25.

⁸⁴ Table 9, “Numbers of Oneida County Poorhouse Births (and Comparison to Erie County Almshouse Births.)”

by marriage. According to the Union & Advertiser, the Police Magistrate was investigating “another charge of seduction,” which could be punishable by imprisonment in the state prison.⁸⁶ Thus, men attempting to escape their role as the supporters of women and children could themselves be punished by forced dependence through the removal of their civil liberties.

The Union & Advertiser observed, however, that “it is not often that such complaints amount to a conviction, for the want of evidence.” Yet, the paper did not lament this fact. The bias against such a claim by a woman, however, was also evident in the article, as the writer comments that “the design of the law may be well enough, but it is susceptible of great abuse.”⁸⁷ Here the Union & Advertiser reflected suspicion of women who brought formal charges of bastardy against men.

The Union & Advertiser also commented that the “statute is sometimes made available to effect marriage contracts which could not otherwise be consummated.”⁸⁸ As evidenced by the article, at least some women were using the court system as a way of replacing pre-industrial community and cultural pressures on young men to marry their pregnant lovers. Here, the jail sentence and the marriage were forms of punishment for a crime committed, the marriage representing the lesser punishment. Conversely, innocence in the case – relatively easy to prove – would mean rejection of the construction of manhood equated with independence in the form of having dependents.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ “Another Seduction Case,” *Rochester Union & Advertiser* January 9, 1857, 3-1.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Instead, the defendant's masculinity would be maintained through independence in the form of a separated existence from the women and children with the exception of sexual access to women.

According to the Union & Advertiser, Alice Dunham brought a legal complaint against Patrick Keefe, and "the parties...are respectably connected. The girl is about nineteen years of age, and the daughter of a mechanic. The man, or boy rather, is but eighteen, and has for some years been steadily employed by a tobacconist."⁸⁹ The Rochester case of Dunham and Keefe may suggest why Niagara and Oneida counties were becoming more focused on and anxious about poorhouse births in the 1850s: "The complainant gave a ...forward statement of the case, and swore positively to repeated promises of marriage made by the defendant." She claimed implicitly that the sex was given in exchange for the promise of marriage, that is, for her, there was a contract. Yet

the defense undertook to impeach his accuser by testimony unfavorable to her reputation for chastity, but had not been successful thus far. The nearest he came to it was by the testimony of a young man named P.McMenomy who declined to answer when asked if he ever had criminal intercourse with a miss Dunham. Such testimony does not amount to much if the witness is a friend of the accused.⁹⁰

The Union & Advertiser went on to reveal that they learned at the Police Office "that the young woman was willing to marry the defendant, and that he did not positively object, but was otherwise advised by friends." Here, Keefe revealed the existence of a male

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

culture that adhered to different masculine norms and privileges than those that the legal system and courts attempted to uphold, if not in practice then in theory. Keefe did not object to marrying Dunham but was influenced by friends who rejected marriage because they were evidently confident that he would not be convicted. Neither punishment would be meted out, and so in the absence of that threat, he could not be forced to marry her. The marriage was constructed as a punishment. He did not object but hesitated to marry. The article did express sympathy for Dunham when it said that “The complainant is in a situation to soon demand the attention of a husband and friends.”⁹¹ Like the Oneida County Board of Supervisors, the Rochester newspaper editors seemed to sympathize with pregnant women.

Yet another case suggested that unmarried women continued to have trouble marrying or even prosecuting fathers of illegitimate children. In Oneida County in 1859, the Superintendents of the Poor stated that they personally had been prosecuted in a bastardy case and were fined \$30. According to the records of the Oneida County Supervisors, “believing that the County and not themselves are liable for the same, [the Supervisors of the Poor] asked what course to pursue in relation to the matter.” The County Supervisors advised the Superintendents of the Poor to appeal the case. In this instance, a pregnant woman, presumably impregnated by a poorhouse inmate, charged

⁹¹ Ibid.

the Superintendents of the Poor with responsibility for the actions of the father. The Superintendents, in turn, believed the county was responsible.⁹²

Four years after the Niagara County Board of Supervisors resolved to keep pregnant women out of the poorhouse by awarding them fines collected by the Superintendents of the Poor from fathers, the Oneida County Board of Supervisors indicated that children should be separated from poor parents. The two county resolutions indicated that the Poor Department was not interested in helping to maintain women as heads of household but was only compelled to support women during the temporary period of “lying-in.” While women seemed to have been entitled to support while “confined,” they were not entitled to support at the poorhouse as mothers. The following resolution sought to break up poor families, to deprive poor women of authority over their children and to deny mothers status as heads of household. While the resolution is written in gender-blind terms, male-headed families who entered the poorhouse were relatively few. The resolution was a de facto judgment against poor mothers.

Resolved, That it is the opinion of this board, that minor children of paupers should be separated from the adults, and placed in a department by themselves, to be styled the Orphan department, and that after a minor enters such department, they should not be returned to their parents or friends during their minority, but should be educated and bound out to farmers, mechanics or other business men, unless some responsible individual indemnifies the county against all charges for their support during their minority – also that we request the Senator from this District, and the Members of Assembly from this county, to aid in procuring a law

⁹² *Journal of Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Oneida at their Annual Meeting in November and December, (Utica, 1859), p. 28.*

to establish such orphan departments in every county throughout the State. Resolution adopted.⁹³

The Supervisors were suggesting that impoverishment should be fined by the loss of children who could only be regained through purchase, that is, by repaying the county for the child's support in the past. That the children should be bound out to "farmers, mechanics or other business men" also indicated that they should be removed from the control of women and placed into specifically male-headed families.

Others outside of Oneida County agreed that poor families should be dispersed. In 1855, an article in the Rochester Daily Union proposed eliminating the poorhouse and establishing specialized institutions for specific portions of the poor population: a lunatic asylum, hospital, orphanage and work house. The writer had a special suggestion for policy toward poor women: "Many poor women, who cannot go out to service because of their children, being thus relieved of their care would be enabled to support themselves."⁹⁴

Data from Erie County suggests, too, that poorhouse officials began to understand almshouses as asylums for children in need of protection from parents. In the antebellum era, poorhouse registers indicated only a minimum of data about the inmates. But at the Erie County almshouse, the only additional note about an inmate between 1829 and 1860 was a comment squeezed into the corner margin of the page. The note said that Catharine O'Brien had "abandoned her child," poorhouse inmate number 342, "in the

⁹³ Ibid., 1858, p. 22.

⁹⁴ *Rochester Daily Union*, November 20, 1855, 3-2.

streets of Buffalo.” The infant was “brought to Poor House by N.T. Otis same day.”

The remark is notable as an exception to the dry list of vital information about poorhouse inmates. The keeper evidently felt compelled to record O’Brien’s crime.⁹⁵

That O’Brien “abandoned her child in the streets,” too, indicated an outrage against motherhood and childhood. As public space, “the streets” were the opposite of the “home.” While the latter represented woman’s proper place and protection from the “world,” “the streets” were disorderly, lowly and the enemy of middle-class childrearing. That the child was saved from “the streets” and brought to the poorhouse constructed the poorhouse as a sort of home.⁹⁶

In Rochester, one poormaster aimed to take children away from the influence of a bad mother. Anxiety over working class motherhood emerged from middle class gender norms that constructed mothers as the producers of moral citizens. As the antithesis of the “true woman,” in either their independence of men, as wage earners, or in their construction as cultural, racial and religious inferiors, poor mothers seemed to threaten the health of the nation. It was in this ideological context that Jane Lowry’s case emerged. In early autumn, 1860, Lowry was arrested for “disorderly conduct.” The city poormaster then confiscated her young daughter Frances, claiming that Lowry was an unfit mother. In a dramatic act of agency and resistance, Lowry used the legal system to assert her right to retain custody of her child.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

⁹⁶ See Ryan on conceptualizing “the streets” of antebellum Utica. Ryan, pp. 148-149.

⁹⁷ “A Suit for the Custody of a Child,” *Rochester Union & Advertiser*, August 16, 1860.

The case involved two women, the poormaster and the dramatization of the event by the Rochester Union & Advertiser. The case was covered in three installments titled “A Suit for the Custody of a Child,” and twice as “The Child Custody Suit.” The Union’s labeling of the case as “The Child Custody Suit” reflected its mirroring of a larger battle over who would or would not have custody of children. The Union stated that “the case is a matter of interest to a considerable number of our citizens and we shall closely watch and record all further proceedings in the case.” That the Rochester Overseer of the Poor became involved in the Lowry family after the arrest of mother Jane Lowry provided a link between the categories of poverty and crime. The Overseer constructed himself as a protector of children and an enemy of “improper” mothers. On August 16, 1860, the Rochester Unions & Advertiser wrote that two women had been arrested “in the old Rochester Block” a few days prior for “disorderly conduct, and sent to the Penitentiary.” The paper went on to explain that

One of them named Jane Lowery, has a little daughter, who appears quite smart for a child of her age. This girl was sent to the Home for the Friendless, by the Overseer of the Poor. While the mother was in prison, her sister attempted to get the child away from the Home, but failed. Lately, Mrs. Lowery was bailed out, and she has now brought a suit before Judge Chumassero for the custody of the child. The Overseer of the Poor resists the claim on the ground that she is not a proper person to have possession of her daughter. Also, that the girl has been unmercifully abused and whipped while living in the Block...The little girl does not wish to return to her mother, preferring to stay at the Home.⁹⁸

The writer established that the child had been “unmercifully abused and whipped, while living in the Block.” The article does not say that Lowry had abused the child but

that the child was abused while living in that section of the city. That the child was “quite smart” and preferred to stay at the orphanage provided the Union with moral evidence for supporting her separation from her mother. “It is hoped,” the Union added, that the child will not be remanded to the custody of its mother.”⁹⁹

The next day, the Union printed “The Child Custody Suit” and informed the public that the Overseer of the Poor argued “that the mother was a prostitute, &c., and not a proper person to have guardianship over the little girl” The plaintiff intended to show that Lowry was “incapacitated from bringing up the child as it should be.”¹⁰⁰ According to the Union’s article of August 25, the mother tried to escape from the courtroom with her daughter. The escape included the mother forcing herself into a carriage in which her daughter had been placed by guards.¹⁰¹ The Union’s dramatization of the events constructed Lowry as aggressive and criminal, qualities that sunk to the level of her prostitution and underscored the moral imperative of depriving her of her role as a mother. Yet a letter to the Union signed “M[R]A” refuted “the errors and misconceptions” in the Union’s reporting, saying that “it was the unwillingness of the child to leave its mother, and not any resistance on the part of the mother which made the interference of an officer necessary. Whereupon the counsel and the officer took the

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ “The Child Custody Suit,” Ibid, August 17, 1860.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., August 25, 1860.

child by the hand and placed it in the carriage at the request of the counsel. In order to quiet the child, the mother got into the carriage and accompanied it to the Home.”¹⁰²

The Union had been too quick to misinterpret Lowry’s actions. This misinterpretation underscored the Poormaster’s and the Union’s foregone conclusion that Lowry was an improper mother as evidenced by her being “a prostitute & c.” Yet Lowry could not fulfill the role of a “proper” mother as a working-class woman, even if prostitution provided her with an income that could enable her to hire an attorney. Ultimately, Lowry won the case.¹⁰³

Reforming institutional care for pauper children, a central component in relief reform plans, was shaped by the “child stealing” ideology. As the Albany Almshouse committee put it in 1854,

The melancholy results attending the commingling [sic] of children with adults, (especially such adults as are inmates of our establishment,) are perfectly well known to...anybody who had [acquainted] themselves with the history of the inmates of our Prisons and Penitentiaries.”¹⁰⁴

According to the 1857 state committee, poorhouses were “the worse possible nurseries” because of unhealthful conditions and failure to educate children – in the institution or once bound out – in academic skills.¹⁰⁵ The committee cited, too, the failure to inculcate in pauper children the “ambition to acquire property.”¹⁰⁶ Also,

¹⁰² “Mssrs. Editors of *Union & Advertiser*,” Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ “Report of the Almshouse Committee,” pp. 17-18.

¹⁰⁵ “Report of the Select Committee,” P. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 214, note E.

Children whose parents are paupers in the legal sense, and actual residents in pauper asylums, are generally to all practical intents as much orphans as those who are deprived by death of their natural protectors; and their actual condition is much more pitiable. An association with their destitute parents, and their necessary poor house companions, is not only a deprivation of the attention and comforts which they ought to enjoy during their tender years, but it is a fatal exposure to examples of most evil tendency. Their chance to become virtuous and exemplary citizens is the most desperate of all human chances; and upon a future generation is inflicted the necessary consequence of supporting them as criminals in our jails and prisons.¹⁰⁷

The Niagara County Superintendents agreed that pauper families should be broken up. "It is the opinion of this Board," they resolved, "that minor children of paupers should be separated from the adults...and that after a minor enters such department, they [sic] should not be returned to their parents or friends during their minority."¹⁰⁸ The extent of middle-class fear of poor children is suggested in this comment in the Rochester Daily Advertiser in reference to the relief system itself, calling it "a system that has grown with our growth and strengthened with our strength, until it has become grievous to be borne, and is eating out our substance."¹⁰⁹

That the Catholic community in the region understood that Catholic families and children were under Protestant attack was shown in the Catholic press. The Buffalo Catholic Sentinel warned their readers "take care of your children," an article addressing religious discrimination and protection of children from abduction by Protestants, and the placing of Catholic children in Protestant institutions.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ *Journal of Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Oneida at their Annual Meeting in November and December*, (Utica, 1858), p. 22.

Every one must be struck with the number of bills introduced into our State Legislature within the space of a twelve-month, of which the sole object appears to be to place the public institutions entirely under the control of anti-Catholic agencies and to consign to the custody of various 'Societies' and 'Associations' every young child who, by misfortune or accident, may chance to fall, even temporarily, into the hands of the public authorities. All these 'Associations' are, without exception, hostile to Catholicity; one of the main objects of the institution being to obtain possession of the children of Catholic parents and deprive them of their priceless inheritance of Faith... There are hundreds of poor Catholic children in our public institutions whose parents and relatives have been cut off by accident or disease; surely the eternal welfare of these little ones is worth an effort on our part?¹¹⁰

The extent of at least one Overseer of the Poor's zeal for protecting or reforming children was indicated in the Erie County Almshouse registers. In 1860, one American 8-year old boy, inmate number 633, was admitted to the poorhouse because he was "Running in Streets."¹¹¹

The Rochester Daily Union indicated that the poor were not entitled to the security and place of the "home," the ideological center of middle-class life. "Last and most important of all," the writer asserted, "the idle lazy poor, who now look to the poor house as a home by right, would" in his plan "be compelled to support themselves or earn their living in the Work House." The concept of "home" was essential in the construction of middle-class womanhood. But according to this reform proposal, impoverished women, part of the "idle, lazy poor" and those who could not maintain their own homes,

¹⁰⁹ *Rochester Daily Union*, November 20, 1855, 3-2.

¹¹⁰ "Take Care of Your Children," *Buffalo Catholic Sentinel*, January 31, 1857, p.2.

¹¹¹ Erie County Almshouse Registers.

were not entitled to a home. Moreover, poor mothers should be “relieved” of the care of their children, making them free to labor in the homes of middle-class women.¹¹²

In contrast, the 1857 committee proposed to make better use of outdoor relief, public assistance in the form of cash or needed goods like food or fuel that would allow the poor to remain in their own homes and help them to avoid the poorhouse. In this plan, only the “worthy poor” would be eligible for “outdoor relief,” while “indoor relief” in poorhouses would be meted out to the “unworthy poor.” The worthy poor would maintain family autonomy and cohesiveness in their own homes, while the families of the unworthy poor would be dispersed into separate poorhouse departments. The desexualized “poor widow” would be saved from her “daily martyrdom,” while the employment of poorhouse space for “unworthy” women would deepen their stigma by associating public housing with sexual impropriety.

¹¹² *Rochester Daily Union*, November 20, 1855, 3-2

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have begun to explore who poor women in the Burned-Over District were, why they were poor, how they utilized the poverty relief system that was available to them and how they were viewed and treated in the relief system. The answers to these questions add to our historical knowledge of the region in the antebellum era and illuminate a largely hidden history of women. Moreover, this history illuminates poor women's agency in negotiating the exigencies of marginal, working-class life.

But perhaps it is equally important to ask what this history reveals about the bigger picture of history in the region, that is, in the history of class formation for which the Burned-Over District has been so significant. In the historiography of the Burned-Over District, working-class and especially the most marginal women among them have received little attention for two reasons. First, such women, as can be expected, left little, if any, evidence of themselves. In this dissertation, I have attempted to "find" marginal working-class and chronically poor women in the official documents of the poverty relief systems of Western New York counties. Second, historians of class formation in the region set out to study middle-class formation specifically. As a result of the aforementioned two conditions in the historiography, our understanding of class in the Burned-Over District is one that implies that middle-class formation in the region was somehow divorced from working-class formation. Put another way, the existing literature, implies that the middle-class created itself in a social vacuum.

Yet, as evidence from Lockport in the 1820s indicates, to offer one example, members of the emergent middle-class migrated into Western New York to exploit material opportunities that they knew would be brought by the Erie Canal. As the

testimony of Edna Smith indicates, such opportunities in commerce and in providing services in mushrooming canal cities depended on the labor and the presence of unskilled, working-class and immigrant men. Yet the men themselves were expendable, suffering from chronic unemployment, underemployment, low wages and even death through industrial accidents that, as Edna Smith was quick to conclude, occurred as a result of the men's own irresponsibility. Evidence from Monroe County suggests that the female domestic servants who in large part propped up the lifestyle associated with middle-class womanhood were themselves expendable when they became ill. This expendability and invisibility was functional in a context of class relations represented in new notions of poverty and even of affluence. The native-born, evangelical Protestant middle class denied the structural causes of poverty, redefining it as the result of moral failings. As Smith's account of a downwardly-mobile family also demonstrated, middle-class life depended upon links with others, relatively powerful individuals or families, as well as the labor of working-class people, myths of individualism, hard work and merit notwithstanding.

From the perspective of the native-born, Protestant, middle class, poverty was increasingly associated with immigrants, a conflation that proceeded apace with relief reformers' harsh propositions for addressing poverty. A problem in middle-class explanations of poverty surfaced when more native-borns sought refuge at the poorhouse, specifically, during the depression of the late 1830s. In the Erie County Almshouse registers by the 1850s, the native-born white poor were distinguished by the nativity "American" from the immigrant and African-American poor. Meanwhile, in the 1820s and 1830s, the middle-class provided sympathy, though not necessarily material help - for foreign-born poor wives and widows. By the late 1840s and certainly in the 1850s, however, middle-class notions of poor women were changing. As analysis of poverty relief policy and proposed reforms in the 1850s indicates, only downwardly-mobile,

white Protestant widows remained as the legitimate female poor. Thus, in a sense, from the middle-class perspective, only middle-class widows were entitled to be poor.

At the same time, the majority of the poorest women who utilized relief were childless and single. They comprised the persistently most invisible of the female poor over the era, though they provided the domestic labor upon which middle-class women predicated their own womanhood. From the middle-class perspective, their relegation to the ranks of the unworthy poor explained their poverty and justified their inclusion among poorhouse inmates. Perhaps more than any other group of poor women, they seemed to exist not only outside of the bounds of the society but outside of class relations. The invisibility of these women in itself camouflaged the breakdown of family economies and community networks that made the women available to labor for the middle class.

In attempting to bring to light poor women in the Burned-Over District, too, I have attempted in this dissertation, and only thus far to a nascent extent, to indicate that the Second Great Awakening, particularly in the ideology of poverty that took hold among its participants, did not proceed uncontested. Indeed, the new evangelical Protestant constructions of poverty and the poor represented a radical break with the ideological history of poverty. In continuing to use the relief system in their own ways - albeit within in a severely limited range of opportunities - the largely Irish Catholic marginal working-class in the region seemingly retained the Catholic, if not traditional, notion that the poor were entitled to charity and that poverty in itself was not the result of individual failure. As Catholic charity organizations and institutions gained a foothold in the region in the 1840s and 1850s, the Church continued to offer an alternative and much older perspective on poverty. Yet, for all the diatribes in the Catholic press in the region against the harsh treatment of the largely Irish poor, the extant literature on class formation implies that the evangelical Protestant construction of poverty, if not

hegemonic, was largely accepted. Thus, the implications of this dissertation only begin to offer a more complex understanding of class formation along the Erie Canal, through analysis of gender and even religious difference among the classes.

TABLE 1

Women Pauper Inmates
at the
Erie County Almshouse
Admitted in Families

| | 1829 | 1833/34 | 1838/39 | 1843/44 | 1854/55 | Total |
|-------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|--------------|
| AWPI | 30 | 47 | 78 | 75 | 266 | 466 |
| In Families | 67% (20) | 47% (22) | 23% (18) | 25% (19) | 43% (114) | 37% (173) |
| | .6666 | .4680 | .2307 | .2533 | .4285 | .3712 |

AWPI = All Women Pauper Inmates

TABLE 2
 Percentages of
 Native-Born and Foreign-born
 Women Paupers
 of all Women Paupers
 at the
 Erie County Almshouse

| | 1829 (31) | 1833/34 (47) | 1838/39 (78) | 1843/44 (75) | 1854/55 (266) |
|-----------------|-----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|
| Native Born | 68% (21) | 55% (26) | 50% (39) | 27% (20) | 11% (28) |
| | .6774 | .5531 | .5000 | .2666 | .1052 |
| Foreign Born | 39% (12) | 45% (21) | 50% (39) | 73% (55) | 89% (238) |
| | .3870 | .4468 | .5000 | .7333 | .8947 |

TABLE 3
 Pauper Families
 at the
 Erie County Almshouse
 Headed by
 Single Mothers and Single Fathers

| | 1829 | 1833/34 | 1838/38 | 1843/44 | 1854/55 |
|------------------|---------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| APF | 18 | 22 | 18 | 19 | 121 |
| Single Father | 5% (1) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4% (4) |
| | .0555 | | | | .0392 |
| Single Mother | 44% (8) | 55% (12) | 67% (12) | 63% (12) | 79% (95) |
| | .4444 | .5454 | .6666 | .6315 | .7851 |

APF = All Pauper Families in the Erie County Almshouse
 Sing. Father = Inmate Pauper Families headed by single fathers
 Sing. Mother = Inmate Pauper Families headed by single mothers

TABLE 4
 Women Paupers at the Erie County Almshouse
 Grouped by Nativity
 and
 Accompanied by Men

| | 1829 | 1833/34 | 1838/39 | 1843/44 | 1854/55 | |
|--------------|---------|---------|----------|---------|---------|--|
| NB White | 20 | 26 | 39 | 20 | 31 | |
| IMH Fams. | 30% (6) | 19% (5) | 8% (3) | 5% (1) | 6% (2) | |
| | .3000 | .1923 | .0789 | .0500 | .0645 | |
| Ireland | 2 | 13 | 23 | 41 | 126 | |
| IMH Fams. | 50% (1) | 31% (4) | 0 | 12% (5) | 6% (8) | |
| | | | | | | |
| Germany | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 77 | |
| IMH Fams. | 100% | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 (1) | |
| | | | | | .0129 | |
| Canada | 2 | 3 | 8 | 4 | 6 | |
| IMH Fams. | 0 | 0 | 25% (2) | 0 | 0 | |
| | | | .2500 | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| England | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 7 | |
| IMH Fams. | 0 | 50% (1) | 100% (2) | 0 | 0 | |
| | | .5000 | 1.000 | | | |
| Prussia | - | - | - | - | 1 | |
| IMH Fams. | | | | | 100% | |
| | | | | | 1.000 | |
| France | - | - | - | - | 6 | |
| IMH Fams. | | | | | 0 | |

TABLE 4 Continued

| | | | | | | |
|--------------|---|---|---|---|---------|--|
| NB Black | - | - | - | - | 1 | |
| IMH Fams. | | | | | 0 | |
| | | | | | | |
| Scotland | - | - | - | 4 | 4 | |
| IMH Fams. | - | - | - | 0 | 50% (2) | |
| | | | | | .5000 | |
| Bohemian | - | - | - | - | 1 | |
| IMH Fams. | | | | | 0 | |
| | | | | | | |
| Norway | - | - | - | - | 1 | |
| | | | | | 0 | |
| | | | | | | |
| Holland | - | - | - | - | 1 | |
| IMH Fams. | | | | | 1 | |
| | | | | | 1.000 | |

NB White – Native Born, White Women Pauper Inmates

NB Black – Native, Born, African-American Women Pauper Inmates

IMH Fams. – Women Pauper Inmates in Male-Headed Families (These women included a few daughters and extended relatives.)

TABLE 5

Women Pauper Inmates
at the Erie County Almshouse
by Month and Family Type

1829 and 1854/55

1829

| | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| CSW | 2 | 3 | - | - | 2 | - | - | - | - | 2 | - | 1 |
| SM | 5 | 3 | 1 | - | - | - | - | - | 2 | - | 1 | 1 |
| Nuc | 2 | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| SF | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Hus | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | - | - | - |
| Oth | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |

1854/55

| | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| CSW | 41 | 18 | 14 | 16 | 13 | 2 | 4 | 9 | 7 | 7 | 10 | 9 |
| SM | 21 | 18 | 7 | 4 | 6 | - | 1 | 8 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 6 |
| Nuc | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | - | 1 | - | 2 |
| SF | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | 1 | - | - | - | - |
| Hus | 1 | - | 1 | - | 2 | 1 | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Oth | 1 | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | - |

CSW– Childless, single woman

SM – Single mother

Nuc – Women in male-headed families

SF – Single father

Hus – Wife accompanied by her husband only

Oth – Women in other family groups

TABLE 6

Absconding Women Paupers at the Erie County Almshouse

| | 1829 | 1833/34 | 1838/39 | 1843/44 | 1854/55 |
|--------------|--------|---------|----------|---------|---------|
| Pauper Women | 30 | 47 | 78 | 75 | 266 |
| Absconders | 3% (1) | 13% (6) | 13% (10) | 5% (4) | 5% (14) |
| | .0333 | .1276 | .1282 | .0533 | .0526 |

TABLE 7
Women Pauper Inmates
at the
Erie County Almshouse
Admitted for Reasons Related to Medical Needs
(Unhealthy or Pregnant)

| | 1829 | 1833/4 | 1838/39 | 1843/44 | 1854/55 | |
|-------|---------|--------|----------|----------|----------|-------|
| AWPI | 31 | 56 | 79 | 76 | 266 | 508 |
| WPIMN | 23% (7) | 7% (4) | 2.5% (2) | 25% (19) | 26% (69) | 101 |
| | | .0714 | .0253 | .2500 | .2593 | .1988 |

AWPI – All Women Pauper Inmates

WPIMN – Pauper Women Inmates with Medical Needs

TABLE 8
Unhealthy¹ & Pregnant
Women Paupers in the Erie County Almshouse
Grouped by Family Type

| | 1829 | 1833/34 | 1838/39 | 1843/44 | 1854/55 |
|----------------|---------|---------|---------|----------|----------|
| U&P WPI | 6 | 3 | 2 | 12 | 62 |
| CSWPI | 67% (4) | 66% (2) | 50% (1) | 69% (11) | 92% (57) |
| | .6666 | .6666 | .5000 | .6875 | .9193 |
| Single Mothers | 17% (1) | 33% (1) | 50% (1) | 6% (1) | 5% (3) |
| | .1666 | .3333 | .5000 | .0625 | .0483 |
| IMH Fams. | 17% (1) | - | - | - | 3% (2) |
| | .1666 | | | | .0322 |

U&P WPI – Unhealthy and Pregnant Women Pauper Inmates
 CSWPI – Childless, Single Women Pauper Inmates
 Single Mothers – Single Mother Pauper Inmates
 IMH Fam. – Women Pauper Inmates in Male-Headed Families

¹ I am using the term “unhealthy” to refer to sick, diseased or injured women. I am not including mentally ill women in this group, as this study does not include them.

TABLE 9
 Numbers of Oneida County Poorhouse Births
 (and Comparison to
 Numbers of Erie County Almshouse Births)

ONEIDA COUNTY ALMSHOUSE BIRTHS

| Year | Paupers Received | Births | Percent |
|--------------------|------------------|--------|------------|
| 1847 ² | 560 | 8 | 1% (.0142) |
| 1848 ³ | 613 | 11 | 2% (.0179) |
| 1850 ⁴ | 839 | 8 | 1% (.0095) |
| 1851 ⁵ | 629 | 6 | 1% (.0095) |
| 1852 ⁶ | 740 | 15 | 2% (.0202) |
| 1853 ⁷ | 620 | 8 | 1% (.0129) |
| 1854 ⁸ | 785 | 17 | 2% (.0216) |
| 1855 ⁹ | 1007 | 9 | 1% (.0089) |
| 1856 ¹⁰ | 641 | 9 | 1% (.0140) |

ERIE COUNTY ALMSHOUSE BIRTHS

| | | | |
|------|------|----|------------|
| 1850 | 1370 | 31 | 2% (.0226) |
| 1857 | 1093 | 16 | 1% (.0146) |

² *Journal of Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Oneida at Their Annual Meeting* (Utica, 1847), p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.33

TABLE 10
 Women Pauper Inmates
 at the Erie County Almshouse
 Grouped by Age

| | 1829 (36) | 1833/34 (47) | 1838/39 (78) | 1843/44 (71) | 1854/55 (249) |
|-------|-----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|
| 16-19 | 11% (4) | 15% (7) | 5% (4) | 7% (5) | 10% (24) |
| | .1111 | .1489 | .0512 | .0704 | .0963 |
| 20-24 | 28% (10) | 13% (6) | 21% (16) | 7% (5) | 20% (49) |
| | .2777 | .1276 | .2051 | .0704 | .1967 |
| 25-29 | 22% (8) | 23% (11) | 26% (20) | 7% (5) | 21% (52) |
| | .2222 | .2340 | .2564 | .0704 | .2088 |
| 30-34 | 11% (4) | 19% (9) | 9% (7) | 21% (15) | 23% (57) |
| | .1111 | .1914 | .0897 | .2112 | .2289 |
| 35-39 | 11% (4) | 9% (4) | 9% (7) | 6% (4) | 6% (14) |
| | .1111 | .0851 | .0897 | .0563 | .0562 |
| 40-59 | 11% (4) | 17% (8) | 23% (17) | 11% (8) | 18% (46) |
| | .1111 | .1702 | .2307 | .1126 | .1847 |
| 60+ | 6% (2) | 4% (2) | 8% (6) | 10% (7) | 3% (7) |
| | .0555 | .0425 | .0769 | .0985 | .0281 |

TABLE 11
 Women Pauper Inmates
 at the
 Erie County Almshouse
 In Male and Female-Headed Families

| | 1829 | 1854/55 |
|----------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| All Pauper Inmate Families | 20 | 110 |
| Nuclear Families | 20% (4) .2000 | 13% (14) .1272 |
| Single Mother Families | 13 (65%) | 75% (83) .7545 |

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