Poor Women and the Boston Almshouse in the Early Republic

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Many historians have emphasized the American Revolution as a time of major political shift and relatively minor social change, unlike subsequent Atlantic world revolutions. The era of the early American republic, in contrast, has been characterized as a period of significant social change that rivaled political shifts. Historians point to tightly interlinked social developments: industrialization; technological innovations that reshaped home life, work life, and travel; public schooling, literacy, and access to printed materials; immigration and territorial expansion; forced relocation of American Indians; religious revival; sectional conflict over slavery and the slave trade; rise of benevolent organizations; and reforms in every aspect of American society, including poverty. This essay focuses on the Boston Almshouse, a public institution of poor relief that housed thousands of down-and-outs who could not support themselves in this changing world.¹

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1. In April 1996, The William and Mary Quarterly published a forum on the American Revolution, anchored by Edward Countryman’s essay, “Indians, the Colonial Order, and the Social Significance of the American Revolution” (53,
This essay positions itself in Boston in 1816 and looks back over the previous twenty years of almshouse admissions and discharges, paying special attention to women. The rich literature on American almshouses stresses their rise in the eighteenth century in the most densely populated communities. Almshouse inmates in Boston, as in other cities, seemed to embody the social and economic changes that characterized the early republic. Some of these unfortunate had been dislocated and impoverished by the Revolutionary War; some had been dislocated by the industrial revolution. Some were newly arrived immigrants; some were former slaves. Some were ill; some were physically or mentally handicapped. Some sought entrance to the almshouse; others were coerced by household members or by authorities who wanted to control the poor. Historians have also shown that women were disproportionately poor and in need of poor relief in early America. In Boston, as elsewhere, low wages and parenthood made women vulnerable. They lacked the work skills to support themselves and their children. Some Almshouse women were single and pregnant; some came with their sickly children; some had been widoweds or abandoned. Some fled to the Almshouse to avoid desperate home situations; some were taken there by frustrated relatives or ordered there by disapproving town officials.

342–62), which admirably summarizes the scholarly literature up to that point. About ten years later, Gary B. Nash published “America's Unfinished Revolution” in Chronicle of Higher Education 51 (July 1, 2005), B6–B8, which critiqued the methodology of more recent scholarly literature and prompted a vigorous discussion on the online History News Network sponsored by George Mason University. Nash developed his argument more fully in his book The Unknown American Revolution: The Urruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America (New York, 2005). See Whither the Early Republic: A Forum on the Future of the Field, ed. John L. Larson and Michael A. Morrison (Philadelphia, 2005).


In this essay, I show that the Boston Almshouse was a female space organized around the lives of poor women. Even though more men than women passed through the Almshouse doors, women always constituted a majority of its residents. Even though men had official responsibility for the Almshouse (the master of the house, the overseers of the poor, the male voters who elected them), women’s concerns shaped its structure and rhythms. Through statistical analysis of Almshouse records and mini-biographies that speculatively reconstruct some inmates’ lives, I show that this institution centered on women. First, most Almshouse women had been born within fifty miles of Boston; they lived and worked in Boston and its environs, and the Almshouse was part of their known world. Second, the functions of the Almshouse—boarding house, nursing home, hospital, nursing, day care, school—were women’s work, not men’s work. The duties that more prosperous women performed individually in private homes, poor women performed communally in the Almshouse: preparing food, making and washing clothing and bedding, birthing and raising children, nursing the sick, tending the handicapped, laying out the dead. Third, many women used the Almshouse to anchor their families during crisis. Women were admitted to the Almshouse in the last stages of pregnancy. Women were admitted to the Almshouse when their children were sick and stayed there with them while their husbands worked outside. Women were admitted to the Almshouse when age and illness rendered them unable to work. Women were admitted to the Almshouse in their last days.

3. The Boston Almshouse admission and discharge registers are not numbered. Throughout this essay, I provide dates of admission for any person mentioned, in lieu of page numbers. The Massachusetts History Society holds the original “Boston Overseer of the Poor Records, 1733–1925” (hereafter BOPR). Recently the Colonial Society of Massachusetts published the transcribed Overseer of the Poor records for the eighteenth century; see Eric Nelligs and Anne Decker Cecere, eds., The Eighteenth-Century Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor (Boston, 2007). A scrupulous index of names allows readers to track Almshouse inmates over time. Unfortunately, this volume ends at 1800, even though Register No. 4 covers 1795–1817. Other historians who have used the Almshouse records include Jacqueline Barbara Carr, After the Siege: A Social History of Boston, 1775–1800 (Boston, 2005); Thomas H. O’Connor, “To Be Poor and Homeless in Old Boston,” in Massachusetts and the New Nation, ed. Conrad Edick Wright (Boston, 1992), 202–225; Allan Kulkoff, “The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston,” William and Mary Quarterly 28 (July 1971), 375–412; Lawrence W. Towner, “A Good Master Well Served: A Social History of
Not all women came to the Almshouse voluntarily; not all women used it strategically to manage their lives. Coercion is evident in some women’s stories; relatives, employers, or town officials decided they would be admitted. Some women came to the Almshouse only as a last resort and left as quickly as they could. But whether or not they came freely, poor women met in the Boston Almshouse, lived alongside each other, and had opportunity to form a community.

On Thursday, August 1, 1816, the sun rose over Boston at 4:50 a.m., beginning an unseasonably cool day for the height of summer; the temperatures barely climbed into the 70s, the skies remained clear, and the wind blew steadily. That whole week, Bostonians had enjoyed refreshing weather, as sea breezes dissipated summer heat. The Boston Almshouse on Leverett Street at Barton’s Point overlooked the junction of the Charles River and Boston Harbor, well situated to capture wind off the water. Staff members must have welcomed the cool air as they began the day’s work of preparing meals, washing and mending clothes and bedding, tending the sick and elderly, directing the labors of the able-bodied, and admitting and discharging residents.4

Historians often mark 1816 as the beginning of the “Era of Good Feelings.” The War of 1812 had ended; by defending itself, the United States had demonstrated its nationhood. In cities throughout the expanding new republic, public figures focused on community projects such as almshouses that would display their religious zeal and moral benevolence. Boston town leaders wrote about the “godlike charity of Supporting our poor” in places such as the Almshouse and asserted that this “moral duty” was “connected intimately with the very principle” on


4. The “Almanac” column of the Boston Daily Advertiser includes the temperatures at 8:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m., and 8:00 p.m., “Courses of the Wind,” and “State of the Heavens” in Boston on the preceding day. For weather information for Aug. 1, 1816, and the preceding week, see issues dated July 29–Aug. 2, 1816.

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which “a republican form of government” was built. Josiah Quincy, one of the city’s first mayors, dwelt on care of the poor in his early history of Boston. Such citizens worried that caring for the “worthy and respectable” poor alongside the “vicious and depraved” poor would turn the Almshouse into a “catalogue of wretchedness,” and the overseers of the poor cited “inconveniences” of having a workhouse and bridewells in the institution. But voters refused to raise taxes for separate structures, and no reports from Almshouse staff suggested that “vicious” inmates were a problem. The admission register for the period 1795–1817 shows that only six inmates moved from jail to Almshouse or vice versa.5

Boston’s Almshouse apparently supplied the needs of the poor adequately, however negatively some might write or speak about it. Those elite Bostonians who expressed dismay at the “wretched” population in the Almshouse did not live there. We lack the perspective of those who did, for no Almshouse inmate left a description of the building, its inhabitants, or its problems during the time under study. This essay tries to get “inside” the Almshouse, to perceive the rhythms of the institution and to reconstruct (with some speculation) the lives of some of those who stayed there, in order to understand its function as a woman’s place.

On August 1, 1816, 352 inmates lived in the Almshouse: 157 women, 126 men, 43 boys, and 26 girls. Eighty-six of these were “under the Doctors care,” nineteen were “maniacs,” and one was an “idiot,” according to an official monthly report sent to the overseers of the poor one week later. Four men and two boys lodged in the men’s “Lock-room,” two women in the women’s “Lock-room,” and three men and two women in the “Maniac House.” Several more inmates were housed

in the two “Bridewell” rooms of correction (one room for women, one for men). Those who were ill stayed in the two “hospital” rooms (one for women, one for men), or, if they had syphilis, in the two “sick rooms” (one for women, one for men). The two “cleansing” rooms (one for women, one for men) housed those who needed to be quarantined for health reasons. The rest of the inmates lived in rooms that accommodated six or more people: thirteen rooms for women or women with children, ten rooms for men, and three rooms for married couples. Babies slept in the large nursery and older children in the two “School-Rooms”—one for girls and one for boys. By August 1816, the staff had segregated adult inmates by race, and the nine men and sixteen women of color lived in four rooms (two for women, two for men) in an adjoining house designated for “coloured” people. The older children of color lived in these rooms with same-sex adults; the younger children of color lived in the nursery or school rooms of the main building. The hospital rooms tended to be the most crowded and rooms for “maniacs” the least crowded. Each room inevitably developed distinctive rhythms and atmosphere, and together these rooms constituted a small village of people bound together by the problems of poverty.  

Three new people arrived on August 1, 1816:
John O'Brien (born in Ireland);
JasperTiles (born in Flanders);
Phebe Blackman (born in Boston).

Seven people left that day. Edward Condon (born on the Isle of Man between Ireland and Scotland) was discharged after a stay of six weeks. Katherine Stacey (born in Kittery, Maine) was discharged after a stay of one week. The other five ran away:

Betsy Brown (born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire);
DavidButman (born in Gloucester, Massachusetts);

Each of the runaways had been in the Almshouse for only a month or two. Perhaps they, as the critics asserted, found the Almshouse too depressing a place to live. Perhaps they had been sent there against their will and could not reconcile themselves to the rules of the institution, even though they received food, shelter, and other necessities of life. Perhaps the cool weather energized them to slip out of the building and past the guardhouse. Perhaps they left during the day when the Almshouse was busy with the comings and goings of staff, suppliers, inmates, and visitors. Perhaps they left under cover of night. They could quickly blend into the busy streets surrounding the Almshouse in this northwest peninsula of the city. Four of the runaways had been living in the same part of Boston when they were admitted to the Almshouse; perhaps they returned together to adjacent neighborhoods. Only later would the Almshouse staff realize they were missing and list them as runaways who had not been officially discharged.

Adult females constituted 45 percent of the Almshouse inmates on August 1, 1816. This was typical. On any particular day in both the old and new Almshouses, women outnumbered men and children as inhabitants. Men dominated the numbers of entries and exits, because they came and went more frequently than women did, and they stayed for shorter periods of time. But women always comprised the largest group in residence, and more rooms in the building were devoted to women than to men or to children.

Among the 157 women in the Boston Almshouse on August 1, 1816, were Rebecca Murray, Rose Carrol, Hitty Atkins, and Lydia Nash. They must have known one another’s names and faces. Some of them lived in the same room. They ate meals together, performed daily tasks together, and tended each other. Each had come to the Almshouse via a different route, but their lives intersected in that place of women. In the following mini-biographies, I offer reconstructions of these women’s experience in the Almshouse. We do not have direct evidence from diaries or letters, and these narratives are necessarily speculative. However, they are grounded in extensive data that shows how the Almshouse functioned, and they provide reasonable interpretations of that data.
REBECCA MURRAY

Rebecca Murray first came to the Almshouse in November 1795, bringing her two-year-old son James with her. Born Rebecca Carr, she had married James Murray on August 17, 1792, and given birth to James fr. soon afterward. Although no record exists of Rebecca’s husband’s death, Rebecca was on her own by November 1795, widowed or abandoned. The overseers of the poor initially identified Rebecca as a state charge, since James Murray had been born in Scotland; but they reconsidered and accepted her as a town charge since she had been born in Boston. After twenty-one months in the Almshouse, Rebecca and James were sent to the adjoining workhouse in August 1797, indicating that Almshouse staff thought Rebecca had sufficient strength to perform useful labor while simultaneously tending her son. Soon thereafter, Rebecca and James were discharged.7

The timing could not have been worse. A neighborhood disaster on October 28, 1797 (probably a fire or a windstorm) destroyed a number of homes, including the one where Rebecca Murray lived. William Smith, the ward’s overseer of the poor, sent those who had no other options to the Almshouse. These eighteen people—nine women, seven men, and two children—entered the Almshouse together that October day. Seven of the women and one of the men were so elderly and frail that they remained in the Almshouse until their deaths months or years later (the last, Peggy Cunningham, died in 1811, after nearly fourteen years in residence). The other eight adults were discharged after stays ranging from a few months to a few years, long enough to regain strength and health and find work or external support. The two children were taken from their mothers and bound out as pauper apprentices in more prosperous families.8

This time, Rebecca Murray and her son James stayed in the Almshouse for sixteen months. In February 1799, James was bound to Levi Hathaway in Spencer, Massachusetts, fifty miles west of Boston. James was six years old when he parted from Rebecca, who remained in the Almshouse for another eighteen months, too frail to live independently. When she was discharged in July 1800, she left in the company of Sarah McCarty, who had entered the Almshouse about six months previously. Born on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, McCarty had migrated to Boston in 1773 and had been living and working there ever since. Perhaps Sarah and Rebecca had found job opportunities; perhaps they discovered family or friend connections.9

After her discharge, Rebecca Murray lived independently for nine years. Whatever work she found must have kept her going until joblessness or illness made her vulnerable once again. In January 1809, she was admitted to the new Almshouse, relocated from central to northwest Boston and now a far more imposing building. Between January 1809 and August 1817, Rebecca entered and left the new Almshouse four times. Her shortest stay was one month in 1815: She was discharged from the Almshouse on September 15, 1815, the same day that six other women ran away together. Perhaps Rebecca’s approved departure provided cover for the unauthorized flight of the other six. Whatever job or opportunity prompted her discharge, it did not meet the case. She was readmitted to the Almshouse a week later, sent there by the same overseer of the poor who had authorized her previous admissions. She stayed for twenty-two months.

When Rebecca Murray’s son James turned twenty-one in 1814, he finished his term as a pauper apprentice. Trained as a farmer by his master, perhaps James found work sufficient to support himself and his mother. Perhaps Rebecca was discharged from the Almshouse in 1815 and again in 1817 because she (and the Almshouse staff) expected to rejoin her son. Or perhaps the staff determined that she no longer needed the resources of the Almshouse and sent her away to an undetermined future. Perhaps she, like so many other poor women, lost contact with her son; perhaps she disappeared into the growing population of Boston, dying without ever knowing what happened to that child she brought to the Almshouse twenty years before.10

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8. Admissions of John Adams, James Armstrong, Mary Bailey, Samuel Brown, Peggy Cunningham and child, Hannah Fowles, Rebecca and James Murray, Isaac Philsbury, Eleanor Raymond, Hepha Rice, Eleanor Richia, Benjamin Shelton, Nancy and Sally Stone, Peggy Taylor, Thomas Walker, and Evan Williams, all Oct. 28, 1797, BOPR.
9. Indenture of James Murry [Murray] to Levi Hathaway, Feb. 29, 1799, “Indentures of Poor Children Bound out as Apprentices by the Overseers of the Poor of the Town of Boston [1734-1805],” vol. 6, 124, Rare Book Division, Boston Public Library. Admission of Sarah McCarty on Feb. 1, 1800, BPOR.
10. Another James Murray entered the Almshouse after Rebecca’s last discharge. He died there of “Rheumatism & Diarrhea” at age thirty-eight on Apr. 14, 1824 (“Register of Deaths in the Almshouse, 5 January 1820–12 April 1825,”
On August 1, 1816, Rebecca Murray had been living in the new Almshouse for nearly a year. It was her fourth stay in the new facility and she knew the staff, residents, spaces, and routines. Even though her son was not with her, she was among familiar people. In another year, the Almshouse master would consider her fit to live on her own and discharge her for the last time.

Hitty Atkins

Mehitable (“Hitty”) Atkins first entered the Almshouse in September 1794. The clerk placed a “B” after her name, signifying “black.” When she left the Almshouse ten months later, the clerk described her as “a Negro woman.” When she was readmitted in March 1796 and discharged in June the next year, the clerk provided no racial designation. More than five years later, in November 1802, Hitty was admitted again, this time to the new Almshouse. Record-keeping habits had become more thorough in the interim, and the clerk now gave more specific information about Hitty, describing her as “Indian” and identifying her birthplace as Barnstable, Massachusetts. Eighteenth-century Anglo American record-keepers customarily designated people of color as “Indian” only when they were very sure of a person’s Native American ancestry; usually, clerks lumped all people of color together as “black” or “Negro” or “colored.” But in 1802, the Almshouse clerk responded when Hitty Atkins identified herself as “Indian.” Perhaps Hitty insisted on this precision; perhaps she recalled her Indian lineage and identified her ancestors in a way that impressed the clerk. In 1802, the clerk identified seven other admissions as “Indian,” one of them a “Lascar” from Bengal, India.

This was a pivotal moment in race relations in southern New England. Not yet had record-keepers completely erased Native Americans from local narratives by casting them as the original inhabitants who had vanished.

narratives by casting them as the original inhabitants who had vanished. In 1809, “Indian” could mean a man born in India, a woman born on an Indian reservation near Montreal, or a woman like Hitty Atkins, who had lived among non-Indians and been named by non-Indians, but who still identified herself through her parentage. By 1816, no admissions were identified as “Indian”; the last had been Stephen Orono from Penobscot, admitted in 1808. On August 1, 1816, Hitty was the only resident of the Almshouse with “Indian” attached to her name. When she died in 1821, the clerk described her as “colored.”

Hitty Atkins had been born on Cape Cod in 1750 and had come to Boston at the end of the Revolutionary War. She had been raised in an Anglo American household (there were several in Barnstable), and the timing of her arrival in Boston suggests that her employer had died or had been dislocated during the war; perhaps the family had been loyalists. For a decade after the war, Hitty managed to survive in Boston on her own. But as she aged, she needed help. In 1794, when she first came to the almshouse, she was forty-four. Hard work had worn her down; an accident or a late pregnancy had left her ill. Her stays of ten months (1794–1795) and fifteen months (1796–1797) enabled her to recover sufficiently to return to labor. But in 1802, at age fifty-two, she could no longer support herself. The Almshouse would be Hitty’s last home. She died there on May 6, 1821, after nineteen years in residence; she was seventy-one years old. In his report, the clerk gave the cause of her death as “Schemus Uterus,” probably a prolapsed uterus that became infected.

For Hitty Atkins, the Almshouse was a place to grow old and die. She met hundreds of other women in her two decades of residence and she doubtless formed relationships with them and their children. If she was not bedbound, she met male inmates as well. Her advanced age, her clear identity as Indian, and her long residence in the Almshouse likely distinguished her among the women of color in the almshouse. Some of them, too, were probably of Indian ancestry, but had been labeled “colored” by the admissions clerk.

On August 1, 1816, Hitty Atkins was sixty-six years old and had been


11. “Register of Deaths,” BOPR.
in the Almshouse for fourteen years. She and fifteen other women were lodged in Rooms 1 and 2 of the adjoining structure set aside for "Coloured Women & Children." The sounds and sights in this segregated "Small House" would have become very familiar to her. In another five years, Hetty would be gathered to her ancestors, the result of illness associated with her reproductive organs, very likely the consequence of bearing many children while working hard and steadily over a lifetime.

ROSE CARROL

Rose Carrol was thirty-eight years old when she entered the Almshouse with her son John in August 1810, leaving her husband Barney on the outside. Rose was about eight months' pregnant with her daughter Catherine and was assigned to one of the two "Women's Hospital Rooms." The clerk recorded that she had been born in Ireland, as had a number of other Carrols in the Almshouse at the time. In 1810, Carrol was not a common surname in Boston, and Rose was probably related to the other Carrols. A cluster of Irish-born Carrols had immigrated to Boston in the early 1800s; in later Almshouse records, Rose is listed as having arrived in 1803. Barabas, Thomas, and Michael Carrol all entered the Almshouse during this period, as did Patrick and Eliza Carrol and their children Patrick (Jr.) and Mary. Rose had Irish-born company who shared her last name, whether or not they were kin.\[14\]


A month after Rose Carrol and son John entered the Almshouse, daughter Catherine was born. Barney evidently was able to support himself outside the Almshouse, but Rose could not manage the care of young John and the new infant without the Almshouse staff's support. The next spring, Rose, John, and Catherine were discharged together. May 9, 1811 was a busy day: ten people left the Almshouse, at a time when farm jobs beckoned. But the next month, Rose and the children came back to the Almshouse, this time with Barney. All were in need.\[15\]

For nearly a year, Rose Carrol and her family lived in the Almshouse, close to other Irish-born Carrols. When Barney was discharged at the end of April 1812, presumably having regained his health and located work, Rose became the family's anchor in the Almshouse. After five months away, Barney reentered the Almshouse in October, stayed with the family through the winter, and was there on Monday, February 1, 1813, when forty-one-year-old Rose gave birth to James, a child conceived just before Barney left the previous spring. The Almshouse Carrols probably celebrated James' birth as a happy event in the dark winter days when poor, cold, hungry, and invalid people were streaming into the Almshouse for relief; seven people were admitted the day that James was born, among them three children under five years of age. It was a grim winter. Boston was talking about the War of 1812 and wondering if its men would be mustered for a military invasion of Canada.\[16\]

In May 1813, when James was three months old, Barney Carrol left Rose and their children in the Almshouse. This was prime discharge season, and nine other men left the Almshouse that same day; one of them was Michael Carrol. Barney must have gotten promising work, for he did not re-enter the Almshouse until the very end of the year, on December 30. Perhaps he had received advance word of what he would find on his return; in November, three-year-old daughter Catherine had died. Rose must have been comforted by the presence of other mothers in the Almsh-

\[15\] Catherine's birth in the Almshouse is recorded in Register No. 4 on Sept. 24, 1810, as "born this day of Rose wife of Barny Carrol of Ireland." The "Record of daily admittance and discharge of paupers, 1 April 1811-12 July 1812," records Catherine as 9 months old on June 24, 1811. confirming that she was born on Sept. 24, 1810, BOPR.

\[16\] See "Mr. Quincy's Speech," printed in two parts in the Boston Gazette, Feb. 1 and Feb. 4, 1813.
house during this time of grief. She and other women would have laid out the child’s body and prepared her for burial.

Barney Carroll stayed in the Almshouse for the rest of the winter and left again at the end of March 1814. This time, he took his son John with him; the boy must have been old enough for the Almshouse staff to approve his discharge, considering him capable of assisting his father at work. Rose remained in the Almshouse, tending her young son James and probably also caring for other Irish-born Carrolls. Michael, Patrick, and Elisa Carroll would all die in the Almshouse.

John Carroll stayed with his father outside the Almshouse for more than a year, returning to Rose and James in June 1815. Perhaps he and his father had been on a lengthy seafaring voyage; perhaps they had found farm work in a distant place. Barney never came back to the Almshouse; John’s solo readmission suggests that Barney had died and John had no adult supervision outside the Almshouse. John stayed in the Almshouse for nearly a year and was discharged in May 1816. He was a minor, but the staff must have been confident that he had a reasonable living and working situation on the outside.

About five months after John’s departure, at the end of September 1816, forty-four-year-old Rose and three-year-old James were discharged. Perhaps John had found work that gave Rose (and the Almshouse staff) hopes of reuniting her family. Perhaps Rose had heard of a job opportunity that would allow her to keep her three-year-old with her. But the very next day, Rose and James were readmitted to the Almshouse without an endorsement from an overseer of the poor; Rose had returned voluntarily, indicating that whatever she had encountered on the outside was unsatisfactory. Perhaps Rose could not find John. Perhaps she had found him and was dismayed by the conditions he had arranged. Perhaps John had overestimated his ability to care for his mother and brother. Perhaps Rose’s job opportunity vaporized. Perhaps young James needed care that only the Almshouse could provide.

For Rose Carroll, returning to the Almshouse was returning to family—not just Almshouse family, but other Irish-born Carrolls who were still in residence. Rose remained there with James until August 1819, when she was discharged, leaving her six-year-old son in the care of the Almshouse staff and inmates. Very likely she stayed in touch with her son as she tried to make a living on the outside, and she returned in October 1820, perhaps disabled by illness. In May 1821, eight-year-old James was bound out from the Almshouse, having reached a typical age for placement in a more prosperous family through pauper apprenticeship. Perhaps Rose was given some say about the household into which James was bound. She stayed on in the Almshouse for several more years, was discharged briefly, and then returned to stay permanently on October 19, 1828, when she was fifty-six years old. The Almshouse records list her as finally “discharged” (perhaps a euphemism for “died”) on May 9, 1854, when she was eighty-two years old and almost certainly in her last days.

The Almshouse became Rose Carroll’s home. In that building, she gave birth to a child, buried another, parted from her husband and third child when they went off to make a living, witnessed the placement of a child in another family, and spent the last decades of her life after her children had gone. She had been an anchor for her family, and she had probably nursed and shrouded Irish-born Carrolls in nearby rooms. She had come to the Almshouse when she and her family were sick and weak and jobless. She kept the family going by maintaining a home in the Almshouse.

On August 1, 1816, Rose Carroll was forty-four years old and had been in the Almshouse for six years, with only one absence of six weeks. Forty-one people born in Ireland lived in the Almshouse on August 1, 1816: twenty-six men, eleven women, and four children. Rose Carroll was surrounded by people who knew her mother tongue and culture; perhaps the Almshouse staff referred to one or two of the rooms as “little Ireland.” In another two months Rose would leave the Almshouse with three-year-old James, only to return a day later. Perhaps she knew in advance that an opportunity neared; that John had found work and a potential home for them; that a job had been offered to Rose herself. She could not have known that the opportunity would prove empty, that she would have to return the next day, and that she would remain dependent on the Almshouse for the rest of her life. Rose was thousands of miles from her hometown in Ireland. If she had dreamed of prosperity in the United States, she had not achieved it. Perhaps she was thankful simply to have shelter, food, clothing, medical care, and a place among other Irish people in the Almshouse.

LYDIA NASH

Lydia Nash was admitted to the Almshouse in late April 1816. Her need was clear: she was seven months’ pregnant and could not support herself. She gave birth to a son, George, two months later, and Almshouse officials noted his arrival in the monthly memorandum to the Board of
Overseers. When George was about eleven months old, he and Lydia were discharged together.17

In 1816, Lydia Nash was familiar with the Almshouse. She had first come there in 1809, with her two-month-old twin sons, William and John. Both babies were ill and both died in the Almshouse, John at seven months and William at eleven months. Lydia was ill and stayed on for several months after William’s death. In 1814, Lydia entered the Almshouse again, this time with a new daughter, Eliza, who was very ill. Eliza died four months later, and Lydia was discharged ten days after her daughter’s death. After her stay in 1816 to give birth to George, Lydia would come twice more to the Almshouse. In January 1819 she entered in the last stages of pregnancy and gave birth one month later to a son she named William, in memory of her first-born son. Lydia and two-month-old William left together on April 18, 1819. Lydia returned on December 18 that same year and son William joined her two days later—clearly, Lydia had family or friends on the outside to assist her with childcare. On March 25, 1820 (when winter was ending), Lydia and William were discharged together, the last time they appear in the Almshouse records.

For Lydia Nash, the Almshouse served as a birthing center and hospital for over a decade. She bore three children outside the Almshouse; all three were weak and sickly. She brought them to the Almshouse for care, but they all died. In her third and fourth pregnancies, she came to the Almshouse before her children were born. Those babies survived, perhaps because of the care Lydia received before and immediately after their births.

The Almshouse records make no mention of a husband to Lydia or father to the children. No external records show that Boston-born Lydia married, although a number of Boston men of the right age bore the surname “Nash” and at least one was a mariner. Lydia may have been married to this seafaring man who was absent at the births of his children.

More likely, however, Lydia was not married and bore these children without male support.

On August 1, 1816, Lydia Nash was tending one-month-old George. By this time, she had probably moved from the hospital room to one of the women’s rooms. Having buried three children already, Lydia must have been praying that George would survive. George had plenty of baby company; at least twenty children under age two were living in the Almshouse on August 1, 1816. Nine of them (George included) had been born in the Almshouse. Ten of them would die before they reached the age of five, most of them in the first year of their lives. This high mortality rate for Almshouse-born children (discussed below) far exceeded the mortality rate of the general American population at the time and indicates dismal health conditions in the institution and among the very poor in general. George was fortunate.

During one of her earlier sojourns in the Almshouse, Lydia Nash served as “attendant” in one of the boys’ school rooms. During this last stay, Lydia may have helped wet nurse orphaned or abandoned infants. She would certainly have performed women’s work: tending children, washing bedding and clothing, making meals, cleaning. Such chores were endless in the Almshouse, where many of the inmates were frail and ill and unable to help themselves. A reasonbly healthy woman tending only one baby would have been a good candidate to take on additional work. Perhaps the workload was so heavy that Lydia was happy to be discharged, with her healthy son George, the next spring. Lydia would have returned to work in one of the low-status and low-pay occupations that poor women undertook. If she found an employer who allowed her to keep George with her on the job, she would have counted herself fortunate. The Almshouse, however dismal its medical conditions, had given Lydia and George Nash nearly a year of the necessities of life when they were at the most vulnerable time of their lives.18

Women like Rebecca Murray, Hitty Atkins, Rose Carrol, and Lydia Nash made the Boston Almshouse a female place. We cannot know exactly what happened to these women in the Almshouse, but their lives overlapped there for years. The evidence indicates that they met each other there, worked alongside each other, and tended to each other.


18. “List of Inmates by Room [1816].” BOPR.
They formed a numerical majority of inmates on August 1, 1816, just as they did on every other day in this early period of the United States. They were linked to the greater Boston community; they came and went as personal need and official orders dictated. They performed women’s work inside the Almshouse walls, raising their children, tending to other residents, and performing a multitude of housekeeping duties. They provided a stable center for their families in distress. They lived out their days there when they could no longer labor for the benefit of their families. If the Boston overseers of the poor or the publishers of the Boston Gazette ever thought to publish an interview with a “representative” inmate of the Almshouse, it would have been with someone like Murray, Atkins, Carrol, or Nash, for such women dominated the Boston Almshouse.

During the colonial era, Boston stood out as a cultural leader in Anglo America. Its religious and educational institutions served as models for others, with the first mandatory education laws, printing press, and newspaper, and the highest literacy rate in British North America. It led the way in adapting English systems of poor relief. Boston was the first North American city to establish an almshouse, voted into existence in 1662 and first inhabited in 1664. Before 1700, Boston voters also established the office of overseer of the poor whose responsibilities included the supervision of the almshouse and appointment of an almshouse master.19

One hundred years later, Boston had lost its status as “first.” Its population had grown more slowly than New York City or Philadelphia, which established almshouses during the eighteenth century. Some Bostonians deplored their Almshouse as inferior to those elsewhere; even the new Almshouse of 1801 rapidly became the object of public criticism. The numbers of people officially designated as “poor” grew more quickly than the general Boston population during the early republic: Between 1790 and 1820, Almshouse admissions more than quadrupled, while Boston’s general population barely doubled. Clearly, “the poor” were perceived as a serious problem by some, and sending them into the Almshouse became a primary responsibility of the overseers of the poor.20

Over the years, Boston voters tried to provide a building that could accommodate the rising numbers of poor people who could not be maintained through “outdoor relief.” The first Almshouse burned down in 1682; the second Almshouse opened in 1686. In 1723, a prison was constructed within the Almshouse. In 1739, an adjoining building opened as a workhouse. Boston magistrates hoped that the Almshouse, the workhouse, and the prison together would take Boston’s unwanted and destitute poor off the streets. In 1742, the crowded Almshouse was renovated and expanded. Various petitions to separate the workhouse and prison from the Almshouse failed repeatedly, and when the new Almshouse opened in 1801 at Barton’s Point, it still contained rooms set aside for correctional measures. Overseers of the poor and other officials saw to it that the “poor” quickly filled the building (see Figure 1). In 1800, 299 people were admitted to the Almshouse, or 1.2 percent of the population; in 1810, 521 people were admitted, or 1.5 percent of the population. In 1816, 788 were admitted, about 2 percent of the population. The Almshouse was a significant operation.21

Almshouse records are key primary materials for this study. These records grew in quantity and quality over the eighteenth century. Although the Almshouse began operations in the late 1600s, the first census of inmates was not taken until August 1756. Formal Almshouse

19. Town Meetings of Jan. 31, 1662 and Dec. 12. 1664, Boston Records from 1660 to 1701, RREHB, vol. 7 (Boston, 1881), 7, 24. Boston voters elected Overseers of the Poor for the first time at the annual election meeting on Mar. 9. 1691, Boston Records from 1660 to 1701, RREHB, vol. 7, 206; Robert Francis Seybolt, The Town Officials of Colonial Boston, 1634-1775 (Cambridge, MA, 1939), 82. The first keeper of the almshouse, Robert Hawkins, was appointed at the Selectmen Meeting of Mar. 20, 1693, Boston Records from 1660 to 1701, RREHB, vol. 7, 213; Seybolt, Town Officials, 87.

20. For population statistics, see Susan B. Carter et al., eds., Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present (New York, 2006), Table Aa832-1033 and Table Ee60-64, vol. 1, 110-18 and vol. 5, 655. For other almshouses, see Rockman, Welfare Reform in the Early Republic, 6-7, 98. Town Meetings of Aug. 19, 1790 and May 21, 1795, Boston Town Records, 1784 to 1796, RREHB, vol. 31 (Boston, 1903), 239, 398; Boston Gazette editorials; Committee Report, Town Meeting of Nov. 10, 1813, Boston Town Records, 1796 to 1813, RREHB vol. 35, 353-54.

registers, which began in 1758, provide relatively little information beyond names and dates and follow a haphazard format. Almshouse Register No. 4 is the first to present admissions alphabetically. Over 11,000 entries for the period 1795–1817, contained in 287 pages, provide basic information about Almshouse admissions and discharges in a consistent fashion. The data in the third and fourth Almshouse registers, along with overseer of the poor records, town and selectmen meeting records, newspaper commentaries, and early histories of Boston, provide a base of evidence that allows us to look through the doors of the Almshouse and recognize it as a female space.22

Figure 1: Admissions to the Boston Almshouse, 1795–1817.

Women formed the largest demographic group in the Boston Almshouse. The demographic profile of people in the Almshouse on any day differed from the demographic profile of people admitted to the Almshouse over time. Before and during the Revolution, women dominated the numbers admitted and numbers in residence. After the Revolution, men dominated the numbers admitted, while women dominated the numbers in residence. For the period 1795–1817, men accounted for 46 percent of admissions and women accounted for less than 39 percent. But women were 25 percent more likely than men to be admitted more than once, and women stayed in the Almshouse longer. During this time period, men’s average stay was 5.85 months and women’s was 8.34 months; men’s median stay was 1.90 months and women’s was 2.15 months. Men were the majority of adults with short stays (less than two years); women were the majority of adults with long stays (two years or more). A core of long-stay women like Hitty Atkins formed a significant presence on any day in the Almshouse.23

The sharp decline in length of stay over the last years of the 1700s (see Figure 2) was almost certainly due to the crowded conditions of the old Almshouse. That is, inmates were encouraged to leave, and perhaps discharged hastily, because of limited space. In 1801, when the new and much larger Almshouse opened, women’s length of stay increased quickly, men’s length of stay adjusted more slowly. Whatever critics of the new Almshouse might say, the building’s larger size accommodated more people, and allowed residents to stay longer. In both old and new

22. “A List of Persons, Beds &c. in the almshouse Augt. 1756,” BOPR. “Almshouse Admissions, November 9, 1758–December 31, 1774,” BOPR.

Almshouses, women dominated by sheer numbers; their voices, faces, clothing, and conversation set the tone.

Almshouse women were more connected than Almshouse men to Boston and its satellite communities. Almshouse women were local. The great majority of women were born in Boston and its environs; the majority of men in the Almshouse were not (see Figure 3). For most women, the Almshouse was part of a familiar city, a landmark on their horizon. Like Rose Carrol, they maintained ties with family and friends outside the Almshouse doors. Like Lydia Nash, they returned to the Almshouse in times of crisis because it was part of their geographical and social world. For most men, on the other hand, the Almshouse was an unfamiliar place in an unfamiliar city. Snapshots of admission days show women coming from Boston, surrounding towns, and nearby states. Men were more likely coming from distant states and foreign countries. Their ship had just anchored at Boston and their captain directed them to the Almshouse. Or after a season of farm labor, they had migrated to Boston looking for work and shelter in the winter months. The Almshouse was not part of their landscape.

As a port town, early republic Boston directly experienced economic ups and downs connected to Atlantic world events: the undeclared war between the United States and France in 1798, the new U.S. Navy efforts to quash the Barbary pirates, the Embargo of 1807, and the War of 1812. Throughout these upheavals, the Almshouse continued to receive “foreigners” and “strangers” (mostly male) as well as those who came from Boston and towns around it (mostly female). “Foreign” admissions must have been a curiosity for Almshouse staff and inmates alike, giving them glimpses of the seafaring world that linked Boston to the rest of the globe by 1800.24

Over the period 1795–1817, about 1 percent of Almshouse arrivals came from beyond Western Europe. Of the 102 who named Africa as their birthplace, only six were women. Of the 42 who named birthplaces in Asia, none were women. Between 3 and 6 percent of Almshouse admissions named continental European birthplaces, with Germany and France leading the numbers; among these, men outnumbered women 10 to 1. About 25 percent of Almshouse admissions named Ireland, England, or Scotland as birthplaces; among these, men outnumbered women more than 3 to 1. Before September 1795, the Almshouse register did not list birthplace of people admitted, and once clerks started including this information, Irish-born people like Rose Carrol and her family dominated among the foreign-born. Several generations before the potato famine spurred massive emigration, people streamed from Ireland to North America to escape the persecution and violence that surrounded the 1798 Irish Rebellion against British rule. But local birthplaces, such as the ones named by Lydia Nash and Hitty Atkins, far outnumbered all foreign birthplaces.25

The Almshouse encompassed women’s work. In early nineteenth-century New England, most men earned a living by going to sea, to


the fields (crops and livestock), or to the craftsman's and tradesman's workshop. Most women undertook both reproductive labor (birthing and raising children) and household labor (cooking food, making bedding and clothing, washing and cleaning, keeping kitchen gardens, raising fowl). In the first years of the industrial era, the job hunt took poor men farther distances and for longer times, leaving women and children in precarious conditions.

However female-centered the Almshouse was, the institution developed within a male-centered society that expected women to see to the daily needs of men. No matter how destitute they were, men in the Almshouse could expect women to serve them food and drink, wash their clothes and bed linen, and dress their sores. At this institution of last resort, women's labor supplied the necessities of life. Girls and women were sometimes plucked from the pool of Almshouse inmates and "promoted" to staff. Lydia Nash served as the "attendant" in the boys' school room. Nancy Jackson, who was admitted to the Almshouse 26 different times between December 4, 1804, and July 24, 1817, served as "Nurse" in the "sick-room" for women with syphilis. The child Nancy Morse, admitted "by the Board" on September 4, 1811, had no family to support her or claim her, and when the Almshouse staff saw her strength and promise, they did not bind her out, but rather took her on as a member of the staff "to assist GD's family." 26

As the Almshouse population grew, so did the need for able-bodied women to work there. An advertisement for an Almshouse worker in the August 10, 1815, issue of the Boston Gazette showed that healthy inmates could not provide all the necessary labor:

Wanted at the Almshouse,
A capable woman of steady habits, to superintend the cookery, and other concerns of the kitchen. Such a person wishing to undertake that business, may apply there for information relative to the duty and wages, &c. 27

26. "List of inmates by room, [1816]." BOPR. Nancy Jackson ran away from the Almshouse sixteen times, suggesting that she found her work less than satisfactory. She rarely stayed in the almshouse more than a month or two. Despite her penchant for running away, the Almshouse repeatedly admitted her and put her to work at what must have been an unpleasant job—tending women in the last stages of venereal disease.


28. An Account of the Boston Female Asylum, with the Act of Incorporation, By-Laws, Rules, and Regulations (Boston, 1833), quotation from 23–24. The success of the girls' asylum spurred the establishment of a boys' asylum in 1814, which took in destitute boys aged five and six, cared for and instructed them, and placed them with farmers when the boys reached age eleven or twelve. While the boys' asylum was organized and overseen by men, women directed and ran its everyday operations. See An Account of the Boston Asylum for Indigent Boys, incorporated February 24, 1814 (Boston, 1831).
ship captains. Even diplomats took responsibility. The Spanish consul paid for the board of John Martella and Geronimo Jordan. These payments allow us to see the human dramas in poor people’s lives. They also show that overseers of the poor calculated the economic value of women’s work. Even though the Almshouse inmates did not pay these costs directly, all benefited from women’s labor.29

The patterns of admission and discharge from the Almshouse reveal subtle but distinctive differences in the seasonal rhythms of women’s and men’s lives and work. For the whole period, women’s admissions to the Almshouse were distributed fairly equally throughout the year. Many women were admitted to the Almshouse because they could no longer perform sufficient work to earn a living, and women’s domestic labor did not wax and wane with the seasons of the year. In addition, many women were accompanied by sickly children, and illness occurred in every season. Men’s admissions were less equally distributed, and were more closely linked to seasonal work. During the fall months (September, October, November) and winter months (December, January, February), farming and seafaring jobs declined. Poor men who relied on those jobs came to the Almshouse for help.30

Women’s discharges were more evenly distributed throughout the year, while men’s discharges were clustered at the beginning of the work season. During the study period, over 40 percent of men in the Almshouse left in the spring months (March, April, May), when they were most likely to find field work during the planting season or find maritime work as ships prepared for voyages. Women’s discharges were tied not only to their all-season household work but also to their all-season care of children. Many women were admitted to the Almshouse because of sick children, and they stayed with them until the children recovered, died, or were bound out. Because being discharged from the Almshouse depended as much (or more) on women’s family situations as on their outside employment, their departures were not so disproportionately centered on spring and summer, as men’s were.31

Women came to the Boston Almshouse during critical life moments. Women were admitted during debilitating pregnancies and when they were about to give birth, like Lydia Nash. They came when their children were ill, like Rose Carroll. They came when their husbands died or abandoned them, like Rebecca Murray. They came when they could no longer support themselves and needed a place to live their last days or months, like Hitty Atkins. The patterns of their arrivals marked the Almshouse as women’s province.

The Almshouse’s function as a birthing center is particularly noteworthy. In the late 1790s, 20 to 25 percent of children in the Almshouse had been born there, but after the new Almshouse opened, the percentage hovered between 5 and 10 percent. When the overcrowded building could admit only the most desperate cases, poor women about to give birth took priority and formed a disproportionately large cohort of inmates. Similarly, their babies formed a disproportionately large percentage of children living in the Almshouse. After the new Almshouse opened, the numbers of women and children admitted increased, reducing the percentage of Almshouse-born babies.

Children born in the Almshouse had a very high mortality rate. Between 30 and 53 percent died before they reached their third birthday, most within the first year (see Figure 4). These statistics are out of proportion to the general population, underscoring the vulnerability of

29. Nellis, Records of the Boston Overseer of the Poor, 869. See also Admissions of Nancy Burrows, Nov. 21, 1810; Nancy King, June 25, 1806; Catherine Sullivan, Nov. 22, 1806; Anney Furey, Aug. 20, 1816; and Mary Bralley, Nov. 2, 1816, BOPR. Admissions of Betsy Trask, June 28, 1814; James Rowe, Jan. 23, 1816; Mary Taylor, Aug. 20, 1813; Abigail Dami, May 8, 1815, BOPR. Admission of Peggy, “a Negro,” July 17, 1810; Richard Hogan, Oct. 7, 1816; John Gregory, Feb. 26, 1807; William Slack, July 26, 1815, BOPR. Admission of John Martella, May 23, 1797 and Consul John Stoughton’s account of January 1, 1798 in “Boston Asylum Register,” 14, BOPR, and Nellis, 853: Admission of Geronimo Jordan, Dec. 1, 1815, BOPR.


31. Good examples of mothers leaving after their children died or were bound out are Admissions of Betsey Monk and children Francis and George, Aug. 5, 1800; Mary Manns and children Mary, John, and George, May 4, 1802; Eliza Butler and child Maria, Mar. 10, 1806; Phoebe Crew and child Jane, Nov. 16, 1808; Eliza Lambert and children Alexander and William, Dec. 3, 1810; Betsy Linzee and child Mary Ann, Oct. 12, 1813; Catherine McCan and children Ann, Catherine, James, Luke, Silvester, and Thomas, Oct. 28, 1815; Joanna Collins and child Michael, Aug. 15, 1816, BOPR.
Almshouse babies. Historian Susan Klepp has calculated one-year infant mortality rates for middling sort Philadelphia families in this era: 16.3 percent for medium-sized families and 22.4 percent for large-sized families. Martha Ballard, the most famous midwife of the early republic, recorded fourteen stillbirths and five infant deaths out of 814 deliveries over her three decades of midwifery, a mortality rate of 2.3 percent.32

As the Almshouse statistics illustrate, poor women (undernourished, overworked, and chronically ill) often delivered fragile infants who struggled to survive. Judith Collins was admitted to the Almshouse one month before the birth of her sickly daughter, who eventually died at a little over six months of age; Collins was discharged eleven days later. Catherine Cutler entered the Almshouse two months before the birth of her daughter, who lived only two days; Cutler was so ill that she was not discharged for another five months. Having buried three children herself, and having seen the death of other babies in the Almshouse, Lydia Nash had good reason to celebrate the survival of her sons George and William.33

As Figure 4 shows, boys born in the Almshouse died at a significantly lower rate than girls born in the Almshouse, indicating that baby boys received better care from their mothers and the Almshouse staff. Perhaps these adults viewed baby boys as more worthwhile investment than girls; boys represented greater economic security and social status in a male-centered society where men earned higher wages and had more social rights and privileges. Racial sensibilities intensified the gender preference. Baby girls born to women of color had the highest mortality, with less than a 50-50 chance of surviving. This preference for baby boys revealed itself quixotically in the naming of abandoned infants. A foundling girl “a few hours old” who had been “picked up near Mr. William Greenough’s house” was named “Eliza Poor”; a baby girl left at the Almshouse door was named “Jane Pity.” In contrast, a male “deserted infant” brought to the Almshouse was first named “John Foundling,” then renamed “John Hope” six months later; when a baby boy who “appeared to be only a few hours old” was “brot by some unknown person & left at the Almshouse door at 8 o’clock pm,” the staff named him “John Spring” (it was April). The names seemed to reflect gendered attitudes: Deserted baby girls were Poor and Pity; deserted baby boys were Hope and Spring.34

In the Boston Almshouse, poor women crossed paths at critical moments in their lives. Women like Rose Carrol created a fixed point in the Almshouse for a family in crisis: absent husbands and fathers, physically weak children, unemployment and illness. Relatively few families entered or exited the almshouse as intact nuclear families. The more common pattern was for the mother to stay in the Almshouse while children and husband came and went. Women like Hitty Atkins came to

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33. Admissions of Judith Collins, Mar. 28, 1798; Mary Collins, (born) Apr. 29, 1798; Catherine Cutler, Aug. 14, 1812; Margaret Cutler, (born) Oct. 18, 1812, BOPR.

34. Admissions of Eliza Poor, Oct. 7, 1809, and Jane Pity, Apr. 23, 1814, BOPR. Admissions of John Foundling/Hope, June 28, 1807, and John Spring, Apr. 8, 1808, BOPR.
the Almshouse to spend their last days. The percentage of Almshouse inmates who died there fell over time for both men and women, from about 25 percent in the late 1790s to about 15 percent in the 1810s. Some years, a significantly greater proportion of women died, and over the whole period, 17.1 percent of the women died compared to 16.1 percent of the men. This slightly higher rate reflects women’s longer stays in the Almshouse, especially the multiyear stays that would end only at death. In the Almshouse, poor women had a place to give birth, to tend sick and disabled children, to live when husbands died or left, to be ill, to die, to have one’s body laid out and prepared for burial in the “last office of friendship” one woman could offer to another. The Almshouse was designed for such a life course, with its hospital rooms, nurseries, school rooms, and sick rooms. It was a female space.\(^{35}\)

Poor women had an excellent opportunity to create a community in the Boston Almshouse. Male and female inmates alike were admitted to the Almshouse in a position of social and economic dependency. All inmates received the necessities of life; when (and if) they were considered ready for discharge, they received work opportunities through the Almshouse’s web of connections to employers. Women, however, particularly shaped the culture of the Almshouse. They outnumbered men, stayed longer than men, and came more often than men. They belonged to the local community more than men did. They performed traditional women’s work together. They crossed paths at critical moments in their lives. The evidence suggests that they forged the kinds of connections and networks that make a community.

Patterns of admission and discharge hint at female networks. Women came to the Almshouse in the company of others more often than they arrived alone; women were discharged in the company of others more often than they left the Almshouse alone. When large clusters of women from the same ward of the city entered the Almshouse together, it signaled a disaster in their neighborhood—a fire, a windstorm, a police raid.

\(^{35}\) Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*, 253. Martha Ballard wrote in her diary that when she prepared her niece’s dead body for burial in September 1801, she had “performed our last office of friendship Except her internment.” The actual burial was men’s work both in Ballard’s community and in Boston.

A dozen such clusters dot the Almshouse record between in the early 1800s. The largest occurred on Thursday, September 21, 1815, when nineteen women and one adolescent female were admitted to the Almshouse together. Most of the women named Marblehead and nearby seaports as their birthplaces, and all entered the Almshouse from the same ward in the city’s North End, a congested, poor, and racially mixed part of town. Perhaps their husbands were away at sea and they had come to Boston for better work and community. Perhaps authorities suspected they were prostitutes but lacked evidence to put them in the city jail. The women were not in dire straits: Five were discharged the same day; six more within a week; the rest within a month. Because of their relationship outside the Almshouse, they came to the Almshouse together, and they left in clusters that suggested their network would endure.\(^{36}\)

Almshouse men did not display as distinct a set of social networks as women did. They came to the Almshouse singly more frequently than women did. No incoming male clusters dot the record as female clusters do. Men did leave in clusters, but these reflected seasonal job opportunities rather than neighborhood ties. The busiest times to discharge men were always in the spring months, when farmers needed help with spring planting. The single busiest discharge day for men during this period was Monday, May 7, 1810, when fourteen men left the Almshouse at the same time. It was part of an annual “spring cleaning,” when able-bodied men left the Almshouse after a winter of recuperation.

When women left in large clusters, they were usually running away. Some may have been fleeing coercive situations, since the Almshouse had “bridewell” rooms of correction. Others may have been unwilling to cooperate with the bureaucratic procedures of formal discharge. Nine women (no men or children) ran away together on August 31, 1800; all had been living in the same part of Boston when they entered, and they probably had a way of supporting themselves in their own homes. Twelve women (no men or children) ran away together on May 23, 1803; again, all the women had been living in the same neighborhood

\(^{36}\) Admissions of Ann and Margaret Abons, Dolly Bennet, Mary and Nancy Beverstock, Charlotte Crowley, Susannah Foster, Nancy Hays, Eunice Huse, Betsy Ireson, Betsy Jarvis, Phoebe Kelly, Sarah Madley, Nancy Norris, Eliza and Mary Procter, Mary Richards, Eliza and Sally Sweasy, and Eliza Townsend, all Sept. 21, 1815, BOPR. Carr. *After the Siege*, 64–68.
before entering the almshouse. (Two women, Lucy Day and Abigail Mead, participated in both "breakouts" and may have spear-headed them.) Over the entire two decades of this study, the percentage of women and men who ran away from the Almshouse was equivalent: 13 percent. This is a startling statistic, given that men strongly outnumbered women among runaway servants and slaves in this era. That men were as likely as men to run away from the Almshouse underscores not only their familiarity with Boston's narrow and crooked streets, but also their confidence that they had support in a community of men whose paths they had crossed in the Almshouse.37

Some women created a neighborhood inside the Almshouse walls. Relationships that originated outside the Almshouse were strengthened; new relationships were formed in the Almshouse rooms. Twenty-year-old Sylvia Coon gave birth to a baby girl in the Almshouse in the spring of 1815. When Carolina was two months old, Sylvia was discharged to seek work; she took the baby with her. Sylvia’s search was unsuccessful, and she and her child were readmitted to the Almshouse the next day. Sylvia tried again in August, when Carolina was four months old, but this time she left her baby at the Almshouse, in the care of another inmate who could breastfeed the child in her absence. Perhaps she left Carolina with Hannah Bishop, who had given birth to a baby four days before Carolina was born; the two women almost certainly knew each other well, with babies of the same age to tend, and Hannah and her child remained in the Almshouse long after Sylvia left. Sylvia’s job hunt was successful, and the very next day, Carolina was discharged into her mother’s care. Sylvia probably found it easier to secure work when she was not hampered by caring for her baby and could demonstrate her competence to a future employer. Connections forged inside the Almshouse had helped Sylvia secure a situation outside the Almshouse.38

37. Admissions of Margaret Taylor, Aug. 4, 1800; Mary Williams, Aug. 5, 1800; Polly Allen and Catherine Simmons, Aug. 22, 1800; Peggy Barnes, Lucy Day, Susannah Fadrix, Betsey Marsten, and Abigail Mead, Aug. 23, 1800, BOPR. Admissions of Nancy Brown, Aug. 3, 1802; Lucy Day, Mar. 5, 1803; Fanny Brewer, Mar. 26, 1803; Sally Kemp, Apr. 16, 1803; Patty Wyatt, Apr. 24, 1803; Polly Burns, Mary Simons, and Mary Winship, Apr. 16, 1803; Patty Laraby, Apr. 28, 1803; Sukiy Edes and Abigail Mead, Apr. 29, 1803; Lydia Marstens, May 10, 1803, BOPR.


On August 1, 1816, Rebecca Murray, Rose Carrol, Hitty Atkins, and Lydia Nash lived together in the Boston Almshouse, along with 153 other men, 126 men, 43 boys, 26 girls, and an unknown number of Almshouse staff, mostly female. Women moved throughout the hospital rooms, sleeping rooms, nursery, school rooms, and the spaces in between. They met, talked, and worked together. They took care of children, men, and helpless women. In this communal setting, relationships developed. Perhaps those relationships were strongly mediated by male officials who desired to discipline the poor and keep them in their place. But it is equally likely that the structure and patterns of the Almshouse enabled women to circumvent the anxious eye of masculine authority and create a real community of support for the poorest women of Boston’s streets.

Despite securing work, Sylvia Coon remained in a precarious economic position. She and daughter Carolina came back to the Almshouse on Dec. 26, 1818, and stayed until Aug. 18, 1819. They returned again on Dec. 15, 1821, and stayed until Jan. 22, 1822. At this last admission in 1821, the clerk recorded Sylvia’s age as twenty-six and Carolina’s as six. Admissions of Hannah Bishop, Oct. 27, 1814, and child Rebecca Bishop, (born) Mar. 27, 1815, BOPR.