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THE PAUPERS OF SOMERSET COUNTY: 1760-1800

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THE problem of poverty in the midst of affluence is an issue that has recently come to the attention of the American public, and the condition of the poor has been investigated by congressmen, scholars, and reporters. It seems appropriate, then, to devote some attention to the historical aspect of poverty. This paper is an attempt to examine the lives of a group of early New Jersey poor people—the seventy-one paupers who received assistance from the townships of Franklin and Hillsborough in Somerset County from 1760-1800.¹ Unfortunately, historians have tended to overlook this segment of Colonial society. Even sociologists writing on the history of public charity generally write from the standpoint of laws and institutions, without penetrating beneath to study the individuals themselves; or else dismiss them with such statements as “Economic insecurity is a product of the modern highly developed industrial era.”² But in fact, “economic insecurity” was a significant

¹ Because of a lack of genealogical material, five Negroes included on the poor rolls have been omitted from this study and are not included in the total of seventy-one paupers. Concerning the names of the paupers, I have used the spelling that seems most common. For example, “Van Tyne” has been used instead of its variants, “Fontine” and “Vantine.”

² H. G. Moulton, quoted by Hillary Leyendecker, *Problems and Policy in Public Assistance* (New York: Harper Bros., 1955), p. 1.

problem in rural pre-industrial Somerset County, and a good deal of money and effort was expended by the community to solve it—a startling contrast to de Crèvecoeur's image of an America with "happiness and prosperity in all places disseminated."³

Undoubtedly, the paupers comprised only one division—the lowest—of the total poor. Those who were able to survive without public assistance left behind no records, and are thus beyond the scope of this study. Only when the individual officially became a pauper did he leave a record of his plight, by having his name entered in the "Poor Book" kept by each community. But even here, the sources are extremely perfunctory, usually listing only the name of the pauper and the amount spent for his care, thrown in haphazardly with financial records.⁴ Thus, to discover who these paupers were it is necessary to correlate the Poor Books with genealogical material, such as wills and baptismal records.⁵ Because of the scanty and occasionally uncertain nature of these sources, any conclusions must often be more inferential than statistical. But hopefully, the end result contributes to an understanding of this neglected group in terms of mobility, family structure, and causes of pauperism.

Before examining the paupers themselves, however, it is necessary to study the community they lived in and the institutions established for their care. The Eastern and Western Precincts, located in the southeastern corner of Somerset County, were first settled in the 1680's. After the Revolutionary War, the Eastern Precinct became the Township of Franklin, and a portion of the Western Precinct became Hillsborough. By 1790, these two agricultural communities had a combined population of 4,269.⁶

³ St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, "From *Letters from an American Farmer*," in *American Poetry and Prose*, edited by Norman Foerster (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 179.

⁴ Franklin Township, Overseers of the Poor record book for the Eastern Precinct of Somerset County 1764-1789, and Franklin Township, 1789-1841; [Hillsborough Township], The Poor Book of the Western Precinct of Somerset County, 1760-1799.

⁵ The main genealogical sources for this study are the following: *Somerset County Historical Quarterly*, Vols. I-VIII (hereafter cited as *SCHQ*); *New Jersey Calendar of New Jersey Wills*, Vols. I-IX, Vols. XXIII-XXXVIII of *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New Jersey* (Paterson and Trenton: State of New Jersey, 1901-1944); Charles Carroll Gardner, *Draft Copy of a Genealogical Encyclopedia of New Jersey*.

⁶ *New Jersey, Compendium of Censuses 1726-1905* (Trenton: John L. Murphey Publishing Co., 1906), p. 36; and James P. Snell, *History of Hunterdon and Somerset Counties* (Philadelphia: Everts and Peck, 1881), pp. 794, 824.

In accordance with the New Jersey laws of 1704, 1709, 1734, and 1774, Franklin and Hillsborough elected annually Overseers of the Poor, who were required to use the revenue from taxes to aid the indigent. Each petitioner for relief was examined by the Overseers and two Justices of the Peace. Transients were to be returned to their last place of residence, while the genuine poor of the town could be supported by indenture, grants to the individual or his family, or "putting out" the indigent to whoever would take them in at the least cost to the community.⁷ In practice, however, the Overseers often deviated from strict observance of the law. For example, the transient Johnny Powell was supported by Hillsborough for four years.⁸ In Franklin, one resident was given £2 to reframe his house.⁹ It is no wonder that the New Jersey Assembly confessed on one occasion that the laws for poor relief "hath, by Experience, been found not to be attended with the good Effects designed by the Legislature. . . ."¹⁰

According to one sociologist, "strangers and wanderers made up the burden of public poor relief."¹¹ But at least in Franklin and Hillsborough, this was not the case. In all, only eleven individuals were listed in the Poor Books as "tranchant persons." Mary Davis and Elizabeth Parks, for example, were given "two suppers, lodging and two Breakfasts" before being transported out of the township.¹² But also on the poor rolls were a number of persons with no discoverable record of prior residence in Somerset County, either for themselves or their family. For example, Mary Munsen was on the Western Precinct books at the time of her death in 1773, but references to the Munsen family in eighteenth century New Jersey wills center in Morris County—suggesting that she may have entered Hillsborough shortly before being placed on the rolls.¹³ Besides Mary Mun-

⁷ Martin W. Stanton, *History of Public Poor Relief in New Jersey, 1604-1934* (New York: Fordham University, 1934), pp. 11-23; New Jersey, *Acts of the General Assembly . . . 1702, to . . . 1776* (Burlington, 1776), pp. 404-411.

⁸ Western Precinct Poor Book, entries for 1780, 1782, 1784.

⁹ Eastern Precinct Poor Book, entry for 1786.

¹⁰ *Acts of the General Assembly*, p. 403.

¹¹ James Leiby, *Charity and Correction in New Jersey* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1967), p. 5.

¹² Eastern Precinct Poor Book, unbound entry for 1798.

¹³ *Calendar of New Jersey Wills*, III, 363, 348; IV, 330; V, 363; VII, 165.

sen, five other individuals had no prior record of residence in Somerset County, and were listed as paupers for only one year. Of course, the absence of records does not prove conclusively that these six indigents were not residents of the county. It does suggest, however, that by stretching the definition of transient as far as it will go, only seventeen individuals—less than one-fourth of the total paupers—can possibly be included in that category.

A clearer understanding of the mobility of Franklin and Hillsborough paupers can be obtained by examining seventeen families or individuals whose geographic origin can be ascertained either through New Jersey wills or simply through mention of origin in the Poor Books. Joseph Badcock, for example, was a resident of Somerset County for at least forty years before becoming a pauper, but the records of the Badcock family indicate that they centered predominantly in Cape May County.¹⁴ Here again, this method of ascertaining family origins cannot be completely accurate. Nevertheless, the following table gives an approximate indication of the origin of seventeen paupers who seem to have come from outside the county.

ORIGIN OF PAUPERS OTHER THAN SOMERSET COUNTY

<i>Location</i>	<i>Number of Paupers (According to Surname)</i>
Middlesex Co.	5
Burlington Co.	3
Hunterdon Co.	2
Morris Co.	2
Cape May Co.	1
Essex Co.	1
Gloucester Co.	1
New York City	1
Philadelphia	1

It can be seen that the greatest concentration of family origins seems to come from Middlesex County. This is not surprising, considering the proximity of Middlesex to Franklin and Hillsborough. Two facts may account for the frequency of family origins in the southern

¹⁴ *Calendar of New Jersey Wills*, III, 19; IV, 410; V, 27; VI, 27.

and western parts of New Jersey. First, the Old York Road which connected New York and Philadelphia passed through Somerset County north of Franklin and Hillsborough. It is possible that a small overflow from the great traffic between these two cities spilled into the Eastern and Western Precincts, including the transients Johnny Powell from New York and John Demsey from Philadelphia.¹⁵ Secondly, in both the southern and western portions of New Jersey there were desolate regions of subsistence farms and impoverished inhabitants: the "Pineys" and the "Jackson Whites."¹⁶ Yet in the majority of instances, the paupers seem to have originated within Somerset County; demonstrating that these individuals were largely a non-mobile segment of the population.

Besides mobility, the paupers of Hillsborough and Franklin can be examined according to the nature of their immediate families. Men, women, and children were all represented on the rolls, and their status often shifted over the course of years—as when a wife became a widow or a child became an orphan. But by taking the condition of the individual at the point he first appeared on the Poor Books, it is possible to categorize them according to whether single or married, male or female, child or adult.¹⁷ In the following table, compiled from entries in the Poor Books, the term "single" is used to denote individuals without wife or husband when first given public assistance, and thus includes widows, widowers, and unwed mothers.

This table demonstrates that, among transients and residents, women were as likely to be indigent as men. Married couples comprise only half of the total adults, and their number decreased with length of time on the rolls. Finally, children formed a large percentage of the resident poor, primarily as orphans, bastards, or children cut off from the support of one parent. But the number of children

¹⁵ Eastern Precinct Poor Book, entry for 1799; Western Precinct Poor Book, entries for 1780, 1781, 1782, 1784.

¹⁶ Miles R. Feinstein, "Origins of the Pineys of New Jersey" (unpublished Henry Rutgers thesis, Rutgers University, 1963), pp. 27-43; and M. A. Merwin, "The Jackson Whites" (unpublished Henry Rutgers thesis, Rutgers University, 1963), pp. 41-47.

¹⁷ There may have been more children on relief, since on two occasions the Overseers used the term "family" without listing the number of offspring. I have taken family in this case to mean husband and wife.

MARITAL STATUS OF THE POOR

	<i>Transient</i>	<i>Resident</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>
Single Men	6	14	20	28%
Single Women	7	12	19	27%
Married Men and Women	4	14	18	25%
Children	0	14	14	20%
Total	17	54	71	100%

from each family—or illegitimate children from the same mother—tended to be small. Of eight families or mothers with children, only one had three offspring, three had two children, and five had only one child.

Apart from the immediate family, what was the relationship of the pauper to his larger kin group? Sociologists and historians have often assumed that in rural, preindustrial communities, families were large networks of relatives bound together by love, obligation, and economics.¹⁸ For example, one historian describes the function of families in European peasant communities as follows:

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, sometimes cousins up to the fourth degree with no establishments of their own, found a place and a job. The family felt the obligation of caring for all, but also knew that no one could expect food and a corner in which to sleep while doing nothing to earn it.¹⁹

But for the paupers of the Eastern and Western Precincts, this was emphatically not the case. In a number of instances, the indigent were related to large land-owning families, many dating back to the seventeenth century in Somerset County. But the very fact that these paupers were supported at public expense indicates that they did not find a “place and a job” with their relatives. Further, the mobility of transients plus the practice of “putting out” the individual suggests that families did not center in one home.²⁰ According to the

¹⁸ R. Sutherland and J. Woodward, *Introductory Sociology* (New York: Lippincott, 1940), p. 590; and W. Ogbun and M. Nimkoff, *Sociology* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), pp. 713-15.

¹⁹ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1951), p. 10.

²⁰ Snell, *History of Hunterdon and Somerset*, p. 780. According to Snell, Hillsborough sought to obtain a building for housing the paupers—a further indication of the lack of family aid.

poor law of 1774, only parents, grandparents, children, and grandchildren were required to support an impoverished member of the family; it is significant that the law made no mention of anyone outside of this direct line of descent.²¹

Why, then, was support from relatives absent? One reason, it might be argued, was simply because the whole family was poor. If this were the case, however, one would expect to find numerous relatives on the poor books—but in the vast majority of instances only members of the immediate family were receiving relief, such as father and son. Poverty thus seems to have been usually confined to nuclear families, forming a set of “poor relations” to a larger kin group. Perhaps one explanation for this is that in certain circumstances, an individual was simply not regarded as a member of the family. For example, Barent Rynearson, a direct descendent of the seventeenth century founder of the Rynearson family, “absconded” from Hillsborough in 1787; leaving behind two bastard children for the town to support.²² Why didn’t Barent’s two married brothers, or any of his other numerous blood relatives provide for these children? Apparently, there was a lack of feeling of responsibility to assist children born out of wedlock. Similarly, it may be that in-law relationships, like illegitimacy, were not considered binding on the family. Mary Ouke, the widow of a New Brunswick merchant, was not supported by the family of her late husband.²³ The same in-law relationship extended to males as well as females. Jacob Folkerson married the daughter of Hendrick Fisher, a wealthy landowner who left an estate worth £4,759.12.6. Of this sum, £135 and a slave went to Folkerson’s wife and daughter.²⁴ But nineteen years later, Jacob was on the poor rolls, despite the existence of his wife’s brothers, the five sons of Hendrick Fisher. Apart from in-laws and bastards, however, there remain ten adult males supported by the community who had blood relatives in Somerset County. For example, Jacob and Charles Van Tyne were Franklin Township paupers in the

²¹ *Acts of the General Assembly*, p. 411.

²² Eastern Precinct Poor Book, entry for 1787. (Barent was last reported seen in Kentucky!) *SCHQ*, VI, 56.

²³ For information on the Ouke family, see *SCHQ*, I, 283; and Charles C. Gardner, *Genealogical Encyclopedia Draft*, Notebook OS to OZ.

²⁴ Charles C. Gardner, *Genealogical Encyclopedia Draft*, Notebook FI to FitzG.; and *SCHQ*, VIII, 15-17.

at that condition in the first place. It was de Crèvecoeur's opinion that poverty was caused by laxity on the part of the individual, which in turn stemmed from national origin. Of twelve families of different nationality, "generally seven Scotch will succeed, nine German, and four Irish."²⁹ But in Somerset County, it is not so easy to divide the paupers according to ancestry. They were a highly diverse group that included Englishmen, Germans, Dutchmen, Huguenots, and Scotch-Irish; and the mixing of these stocks produced such hybrid names in the community as Jackemintye Griggs, Angeniete Hollingshead, and Geertj Manley. But of the twenty-four surnames that can be identified according to nationality, sixty-two percent of the paupers can be classified as German, Dutch, and Huguenot; while the remainder represent names originating in the British Isles. This undoubtedly reflects the "Dutch" majority in the community at large, and not any defect in national character. It is, of course, impossible to estimate the degree of laziness or improvidence among the indigent, but it is interesting to note that forty-four years before he went on relief, Jacob Folkerson was described by a contemporary as having "the character of an idle fellow."³⁰ John Dunn, a fixture on the poor rolls for thirty-one years, was at first given charity on the usual yearly basis. But beginning in 1781, he was given quarterly payments, and provided with "tow linen for twoo shirts."³¹ The idea suggests itself that Dunn had a tendency to squander his dole on drink.

One significant factor behind pauperism was a change in family status, due to the death or desertion of one member. Ann McKinney, for example, had to turn to the Overseers after being deserted by her husband and left with two children to support.³² Illegitimate birth could also precipitate an individual into poverty. On four occasions, bastard children were placed on the rolls, and two cases of "lying in" indicate that pregnancy could put a woman in sudden need of charity. But this is hardly enough to justify the claim that "the most prevalent problem of public welfare arose from sexual misconduct involving servants."³³

²⁹ De Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, p. 182.

³⁰ *SCHQ*, VIII, 155.

³¹ Eastern Precinct Poor Book, entry for 1781.

³² Eastern Precinct Poor Book, unbound entry for 1797.

³³ Leiby, *Charity and Correction*, p. 6.

Advancing old age, with a resulting inability to earn a living, was another cause of pauperism. Jurisee Breise, born in 1724, was seventy-two when placed on the relief rolls; Charles Van Tyne was seventy-four.³⁴ Taking approximate ages, Jacob Folkerson was sixty-one, Samuel Brewer sixty-two, and Joseph Badcock sixty-one.³⁵ Among transients, illness often necessitated treatment at public expense. "Fallen Sick and Doktors Bill" was the cause of Rebecca Fries, William Grovner, and Edward Weldon's stay on the Poor Books. Perhaps it was a combination of illness and old age that required the town to care for Mary Kinsey and Mary Munsey, both of whom died within one year of their first listing on the rolls.

In any examination of the causes of poverty, some consideration must be given to the question of whether or not the paupers constituted a rural proletariat—a class of chronically indigent families. If this were the case, personal tragedies such as old age and illness would simply push a family already on the level of poverty into pauperism. By studying the economic and social trends within the community itself, it seems clear that such a depressed class did in fact exist. As the following table indicates, the number of pauper families increased greatly between 1775 and 1799. This cannot be explained solely in terms of an increasing population: from 1790-1799, the population grew by approximately eight percent, while the number of individual paupers increased by 137 percent.³⁶

Why this sharp rise in poverty? On the immediate level, some of it may have been caused by the severe deflation of the 1780's, the decreasing productivity of farms, and the destruction of wheat crops by the Hessian Fly plague which began in 1786.³⁷ But even more significant were changes in the social structure of Franklin and Hills-

³⁴ *SCHQ*, II, 212.

³⁵ Ages, other than those computed from baptismal records, are estimated by assuming that the individual was at least twenty-one when witnessing a legal document, and at least seventeen when being married or having a child.

³⁶ The absolute figures, of course, are less startling. The number of paupers increased by eleven, the population increased by approximately 327. The latter number is estimated by calculating the rate of growth between 1790 and 1810, since there are no population figures for 1800. See *Compendium of Censuses*, p. 36.

³⁷ Richard P. McCormick, *Experiment in Independence: New Jersey in the Critical Period 1781-1789* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1950), pp. 188-9.

NUMBER OF POOR, BY SURNAME, IN FRANKLIN AND
HILLSBOROUGH TWPS., 1775-1799.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Families on Poor Books (by surname)</i>
1775	4
1776	3
1777	1
1778	3
1779	1
1780	2
1781	4
1782	2
1783	1
1784	2
1785	1
1786	7
1787	4
1788	2
1789	6
1790	8
1791	7
1792	9
1793	8
1794	7
1795	8
1796	12
1797	19
1798	16
1799	19

borough in the second half of the eighteenth century. Professor Kenneth Lockridge has advanced the thesis that as towns in New England became more settled, the amount of available land grew smaller. Opportunity thus became limited, and a sharper cleavage emerged between rich and poor.³⁸ Presumably, the same situation occurred in Somerset County. From the initial settlement in the 1680's, Franklin and Hillsborough grew in population—reaching a combined total of 4,269 in 1790. It may be that room for expansion

³⁸ Kenneth Lockridge, "Land Population, and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630-1790," *Past and Present*, Number 39 (April, 1968), pp. 62-80.

had nearly reached its limit. This situation is hinted at by an examination of the sales of land by East New Jersey proprietors in Somerset County. As the following table indicates, the average amount of acreage purchased from the proprietors declined substantially by the second decade of the eighteenth century.³⁹

AVERAGE ACREAGE OF LANDS PURCHASED
FROM THE PROPRIETORS AND THEIR HEIRS.
SOMERSET COUNTY, 1683-1744.

<i>Year of Purchase</i>	<i>Average No. of Acres</i>
1683	1301.0
1685	1349.8
1686	474.0
1687	375.0
1688	541.6
1690	1480.0
1692	500.0
1693	2901.0
1697	500.0
1701	1605.0
1717	7500.0
1721	132.0
1726	125.0
1727	240.7
1728	158.0
1729	99.0
1730	116.3
1731	100.0
1736	22.0
1740	509.6
1743	562.6
1744	66.0

Two events in the decade of the 1760's symbolize the diminishing availability of land: the migration of at least fifty families from the county to Conwego, Pennsylvania, and the first recorded appropriation for poor relief in Franklin (1767) and Hillsborough (1763).⁴⁰

³⁹ Information on land purchases taken from a bill in chancery of 1747, reprinted in Snell, *History of Hunterdon and Somerset*, pp. 562-63.

⁴⁰ *SCHQ*, IV, 161-67.

In short, the late eighteenth century witnessed a crisis of the old order, and the appearance of pauperism was one of its manifestations.

Writing about the paupers of eighteenth-century Franklin and Hillsborough often seems like writing about ancient Egyptian peasants—both were a remote and silent segment of society. The fragmentary nature of the records concerning them makes an exact knowledge of their mobility and kin relationships impossible. Enough remain, however, to challenge some misconceptions. The paupers were not wandering strangers. Instead, most were residents of Somerset County. But at the same time they seem to have been strangers to their relatives, and had to turn to the community for succor. Of course, this collective portrait leaves out a great deal. One can only guess at the misery of a vagrant dying in a strange town, of a woman left with a bastard child, or of a man growing old and helpless in a community that had become increasingly alien. There must have been a sense of loneliness and hopelessness in these individuals that can only be hinted at by mute official records.