The Crime of Poverty:

The Rise and Fall of the Workhouse From
Elizabethan England to Kansas City, Missouri

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“I believe in work. Criminals do not. I believe the best way to make a man better, of purifying him body and soul, is to keep him at work.”

- Police Judge Henry G. Kyle

**Introduction**

In today’s politically charged environment, there are many challenges constantly being debated. Controversial opinions concerning taxes, war, and healthcare fly across media screens on a daily basis, with rallies of people arguing competing perspectives. However, there is one issue that has been perhaps overshadowed by the rest: poverty and those affected by it. Poverty has always existed in modern society, and those living in it have often been neglected, and even abused, throughout history. As time has progressed, what used to be a civil distaste for the poor has at times metastasized into outright hatred and structural victimization. In order to grasp the institutionalized neglect of the downtrodden, it is important to rediscover the grim history of those struggling with poverty. One institution that played a crucial role in the systematic abuse of the destitute members of society was the workhouse. This paper will outline the purpose and nature of the institution of the workhouse, while special attention will be given to the Kansas City (Missouri) workhouse, which served as an example of a more progressive vision of the workhouse dedicated more to rehabilitation than punishment.

**Elizabethan Poor Laws and the Invention of the Workhouse**

The workhouse has its origins in 17th century England. In 1547, under the rule of King Edward VI, the poor were dealt with strictly and harshly. Law decreed that the impotent - or disabled - poor were to be taken care of in cottages or townhouses, while the impoverished who were physically fit were to be branded with a “V” on the chest and made a slave for three years if they abstained from work for more than three days.

While branding the poor threatened many to seek forms of employment, the punishment did not provide any new opportunities. English authorities realized this and enacted a law that combined poverty relief with a reformed version of Edward VI’s ideology. In 1601, an effort to help impoverished citizens was initiated by the “Poor Relief Act.” The Poor Relief Act called upon churches (or “parishes”) to take responsibility in helping the poor. Like Edward VI’s law, the impotent poor were to be cared for, but instead of being sent to cottages they were to be sent to almshouses or poorhouses. In contrast, the able-bodied poor were to be sent to Houses of Industry or poor farms, where they would perform labor for their wages. In the 1600s unemployment was still a crime, so the idle poor (those who were able to work but were not working) were grouped with criminals, all of whom could be sent to Houses of Correction. However, this system had many flaws which contributed to its downfall. Parishes were allotted limited government funding, rendering them unable to provide a charitable service for all of England’s poverty-stricken citizens. Since there was little money to be made in taking care of the poor, government officials soon began looking for alternative ways to remedy the poor problem.
Concurrently, more and more citizens were migrating to cities looking for work, and city leaders were forced to find ways to manage an ever-increasing poor population. With options running out for paupers, the concept of the workhouse was born. Similar to the almshouse, residents of the workhouse were expected to perform a variety of work to earn a weekly wage. They would remain residents of the workhouse until they had enough money to leave the establishment. While this plan may have sounded good in theory, the workhouse swiftly became a corrupt and uncaring environment. While workhouse superintendents competed to operate the most cost-effective workhouse, the lives and well-being of the poor was often sacrificed. Workhouse inmates were routinely subject to inadequate diets, medical attention, and living environments. 4

There are reports from persons who lived inside of a many different workhouses, and they shine a light on what life was like inside of the torturous workhouse. One such report was written in 1865 by inmate Felix John Magee about his fellow inmate, Richard Gibson, who was diagnosed postmortem with scurvy. Magee describes his experiences caring for his cellmate with haunting imagery:

“I washed him, and such a sight of suffering may I never see again. He was covered from the crown of the head to the soles of the feet with scabs and sores. He had sores on the back, and his legs are in a shocking state from neglect… His hair is unusually long, and was matted from constantly lying in bed, and his hands were as it were enamelled with his own soil. It was an eighth of an inch thick on the palm of his hand and fingers, for I see no night-stool and bed-pan in this ward.”

He addressed this letter to Thomas Henry, the local magistrate of the St. Giles Workhouse (where Magee resided) pleading for help by exposing the negligence of the nurses and officers around him. He insisted that Gibson’s wounds had never been dressed since they entered the ward together. He ended his letter with a final cry for help, which read “Sir, I hope you will send an officer as soon as you can, for should he die, the ends of justice would be evaded.” 5

Nutrition was another aspect of physical well-being that was disregarded with the onset of privatization. William Hew Ross recalled the diet plan for young boys in the Greenwich Union workhouse in his autobiography in 1842. Ross wrote:

“In the first place, the diet of the boys from 6 to 12 was the same. It was not enough… If you would, sir, just take 4 [ounces] of bread and cut it into eight parts, then put the water and milk on it, you would see what sort of breakfast a boy turned 11 years of age had to last him from 6 o’clock in the morning, till 12.” 6

Abuse and neglect was spiraling out of control in the typical English workhouse, and the life of the poor diminished even further with the arrival of 1834. This year was devastating for the poor as the release of two new laws made impoverished life even worse. In March of 1834, a new law was enacted which required workhouses to be officially recognized as “deterrents.” Named the “Workhouse Test,” the idea was to make workhouses intentionally miserable so that the poor would be so desperate to leave the
workhouse that they would seek employment, turn to a different charity, or unify with each other in order to escape their impecunious lifestyle. A few months later, the final piece to the workhouse horror story was introduced: the New Poor Law. This law officially abolished all out-relief programs, which allowed paupers to perform labor at the workhouse and still return home at the end of the day. Now, the only way to earn government assistance would be to admit oneself into a workhouse. Author Charles Shaw, and former workhouse resident, described his disbelief in his autobiography *When I Was a Child,* with a haunting passage that read:

“If we could have seen what was driving us so reluctantly up that hill to the workhouse (‘Bastile’, as it was bitterly called then), we should have seen two stern and terrible figures - Tyranny and Starvation. No other powers could have so relentlessly hounded us along. None of us wanted to go, but we must go, and so we came to our big home for the time.”

**Poverty Comes to Kansas City**

While the tragedies of the workhouse in England continued, the implementation of workhouses became increasingly popular in the United States, especially in areas that were growing rapidly. After the Civil War, Kansas City, Missouri was one of these cities that experienced a rapid economic boom. The proliferation of railroads had revolutionized trade and industry in the once small city. Stockyard farmers benefited significantly from the railroads because they were able to ship their meats, leather, and other goods to the surrounding Southern states. In one example, the Hannibal and St. Joseph railroad was able to ship over 100,000 head of cattle in its first year of operation. Like many other stockyards businesses, Hannibal and St. Joseph had expanded into a multimillion dollar company in a relatively short time. The profits of the revitalized trade industry supplied Kansas City with enough funds to construct new businesses and more shops, thus attracting more citizens to the populous and thriving city.

The new citizens came in dramatic waves, most of whom were immigrants or newly freed African Americans. What was previously a small town of 4,000 in 1860 saw an eight-fold increase in population in only 10 years. Unsurprisingly, the economy was unable to support this enormous influx of residents. Many of the new and previous residents were pushed below the poverty line which led to a call for the development of a variety of charities. There were several dozen charities formed between 1880 and 1890 that dedicated themselves to the betterment of Kansas City’s poverty-stricken citizens. Though most operated as a traditional charity by providing assistance with no expectation of repayment, some held guidelines strikingly similar to that of a workhouse. For example, The House of the Good Shepherd, formed on June 29th, 1887, allowed workers to stay at the institution as long as they performed labor such as sewing, laundry, or other domestic works. Likewise, The Helping Hand Institute, formed in September 1894, provided meals and lodging in exchange for laborious activities.
The Kansas City Workhouse

Though there were many American workhouses, the Kansas City workhouses are particularly interesting because of the complete transformation in ideology that occurred between the construction of the first and second workhouse in the city. The first workhouse on record in Kansas City was constructed in 1872 and stood for twenty-five years. This workhouse was typical of others of the time with tales of abuse and neglect reminiscent of the many establishments that existed before it. What makes this workhouse different from the rest is not the workhouse itself so much as the people charged with its operation. What stopped this workhouse from become another sight of unspeakable horror was the staff and community leaders of Kansas City who refused to let those horrors remain unspeakable.

On October 5th, 1895, the Kansas City mayor and a workhouse officer were interviewed for a news article was posted in the Kansas City Daily Journal. When questioned about the condition of the workhouse, Mayor Davis admitted that he “…had pardoned many prisoners in the workhouse on the sole grounds of humanity.” Later in the article, a workhouse officer by the name of Greenman publically reported on the shameful condition of the workhouse:

“It is inhuman and brutalizing to confine human beings in such a place. Major Brant had the place as clean as it could be made, but the men, boys, and women who are confined in that firetrap are crowded in cells eight feet square which have no sanitation. Frequently eight and ten men are crowded in these stall like cells and many others have to sleep on the same floor. Aside from the insanitary condition of the place I found that each cell has a separate lock and key. In the event of a fire the inmates could not possibly be saved.”

Once light began to be shed on the grim reality of the first Kansas City workhouse, some city leaders began to understand the necessity for a new, more humane, institution. In order to begin reconstruction, there needed to be a vote amongst the council and jury. After being repeatedly denied the chance to propose change, Alderman Morgan boldly insisted that the grand jury visit the workhouse themselves. What they saw there was enough to lead to a unanimous vote to tear down the workhouse and build a new one. The grand jury’s report was documented in the Kansas City newspaper:

“These cells have two or three bunks in each and from seventy to eighty men are confined in them. Some contain five or six persons. They put in promiscuously old and young, black and white, healthy and diseased, all huddled together. The place is simply horrible and no man can appreciate its horrors who has not seen it. It is a disgrace to the city that it has been tolerated all these years and it should be abated as a nuisance forthwith. The men who are there should be taken out and placed in some decent quarters until the city can construct a new building in which a human being can live without danger of destroying mind and body.”
With the support of the court system, as well as resources from a variety of city council members, a new light shined in Kansas City as its dedicated community members began the construction of the new and improved workhouse. With this new workhouse came a new hope for the indigent of the city. The journey that Kansas Citians embarked on with this new workhouse is still one that is very controversial today’s society: the choice to emphasize rehabilitative practices instead of punitive punishments.

In 1897, Kansas City opened a new workhouse that focused on rehabilitation in a variety of ways. At first the steps were small and started with considerations for decency. In contrast to men, women, and children all sharing cells together, Wallace Love, chief architect of the new workhouse, made the decision to separate people with respect to their age and gender. He explained that this was so that young children would be kept from those who are “old and hardened in crime.” Wallace also promoted sanitation as the chief feature in his design, providing every quarter with its own set of bathrooms, and even implementing a rudimentary form of air conditioning.  

Though Love’s structural changes to the workhouse design were revolutionary, Major Alf Brant, Civil War veteran and the superintendent of the new workhouse from 1897 to 1898 noticed a different problem that had existed in previous workhouses: once children exited the workhouse, they had few social skills or little educational experience. They had no knowledge of the outside world and often ended up in the system years later. In order to reduce recidivism rates, Major Brant took it upon himself to run a dormitory inside of the workhouse. The Kansas City Journal covered this new workhouse feature, explaining that:

“The boys will be taught a trade, and Major Brant will ask the Board of Education for a teacher to instruct them in the rudiments of learning. This will be a great departure from the present method of treating boy prisoners at the work-house, where they are housed together with time-hardened criminals, in some instances being locked in the same cells with men who act as instructors in crime for their youthful cell-mates.”

Like Love, Major Brant noticed that older criminals acted as mentors to younger prisoners, so he took an unmoving stance on the separation of boys and men. He noted that:

“Boys who are of a tender age, below 15 and 16 years of age, or young men who have committed a first offense, should never be locked up with older criminals. I shall not even allow the boy prisoners to eat at the same table with the men.”

Young men were not the only ones with high recidivism rates. Women, young and old alike, would sometimes turn to prostitution as a way of earning their means. In order to combat this problem, W. H. McCracken, the superintendent of the workhouse who took over a few years after Brant, insisted that women were to be taught the skills every housewife should have, such as cooking and sewing, in hopes that they would find a husband and have him provide for them so that they would not need to provide for themselves. McCracken even took the wives of male prisoners into consideration. He proposed an unusual form of out-relief which consisted of paying the women a weekly
allowance so that they could support themselves and their children for as long as the husband was in the workhouse.\(^{22}\)

The workhouse managed to operate for several years until it was repurposed into a pesthouse to isolate Kansas City residents who were suffering from the smallpox outbreak.\(^{23}\) From there, the building was repurposed multiple times, serving the community as the government officials saw fit. Before its final abandonment in 1972, the building took on a variety of roles including a city storage facility, a marine training camp, and a hospital.\(^{24}\)

The drastic changes in the workhouse operation in Kansas City are a testament to the importance of rehabilitation rather than punishment. Nonetheless, today we still see lower-class citizens punished for the “crime” of being poor. The National Coalition for the Homeless lists a few ways that homelessness is criminalized including legislation that makes it illegal to sleep, sit, or store personal belongings in public space, as well as selective enforcement of more neutral laws, such as loitering or open container laws, against homeless persons.\(^{25}\) In addition, the implementation of city sweeps to destroy homeless encampments and the installation of homeless spikes are frequently practiced to reduce the visibility of homelessness in cities.

As mentioned, there is still a heavy reliance on punitive punishment towards the poor instead of taking a rehabilitative approach. Retributive punishment stems off the idea that people are punished because they deserve it. This is the mindset that workhouses operated on. They viewed the poor as a problem in society and dealt with that problem through a system of punishments with the intention to force the able-bodied poor to find work and support themselves. Rehabilitative punishment, however, provides relief as well as punishment. The Kansas City Workhouse paved a path of rehabilitation by combining a traditional prison sentence with a variety of assistance that they offered. Though workhouses had their rise and fall, poverty has haunted civilizations for centuries and will continue unless people take a lesson from the Kansas City workhouse to solve a problem with compassion instead of insensitivity.
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