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Guide to the

Minutes of the Commissioners of the Alms-House and Bridewell
1791-1797
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Compiled by Susan P. Waide, 2016

Summary

Creator: New York (N.Y.) -- Commissioners of the Alms-House, Bridewell, and Penitentiary

Title: Minutes of the Commissioners of the Alms-House and Bridewell

Date: 1791-1797

Size: .21 linear feet (1 volume)

Source: Purchased from Adolph Fain, 1921

Abstract: Commissioners of the Alms-House and Bridewell were appointed by New York City Mayor James Duane in 1784 to supervise the two houses and to provide general relief to poor people living outside the houses. Minutes of the Commissioners of the Alms-House and Bridewell, dated 1791 August 22 to 1797 October 16, record the proceedings of the Commissioners' weekly meetings at the Almshouse, and quarterly meetings attended by supervising New York City officials. Proceedings concern the Commissioners' management of the two institutions and outdoor relief services during a period of growing need, but are chiefly devoted to Almshouse affairs and their review of individual cases of indoor and outdoor relief. Other documented responsibilities include the oversight of medical services provided, and the indenture of poor children as apprentices, especially the investigation of cases of their ill-usage or misbehavior. The name of Samuel Dodge, keeper of the Almshouse, appears on the inside front cover.

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Creator History

Commissioners of the Alms-House and Bridewell were appointed by New York City Mayor James Duane in 1784 to supervise the two houses and to provide general relief to poor people living outside the houses.

During the period reflected in this volume, the Almshouse provided shelter, food and other assistance to poor men, women and children who were unable to support themselves, including orphans, blind persons, the mentally ill, and the elderly and infirm. The Bridewell housed vagrants, prostitutes and criminals, many in poor health, with rooms set aside as a workhouse. The Almshouse and Bridewell were located near present-day City Hall. Separate City facilities included a jail and hospital. Commissioners administered the system of outdoor relief, managing the distribution of fuel and food to the poor, especially during winter months, and visiting the homes of persons reported to be in distress and likely to become a public charge.

Commissioners were members of a large board of appointed volunteers, with standing committees handling such tasks as purchasing provisions, clothing, and firewood, and visiting houses. Their many responsibilities included review and investigation of charges of inappropriate care, and ensuring residency and other requirements for persons receiving City aid. In addition, they oversaw the process of indenturing poor boys and girls as apprentices, requiring their masters to shelter, clothe, and educate them, and train them for employment.

Overcrowding and deteriorating conditions at the Almshouse required the construction of a new building, which opened in 1798. In that year the City initiated changes in the board's administrative structure, as it tried to manage the public welfare needs of a population that would nearly double between the years 1790 and 1800.

Scope and Content Note

Minutes of the Commissioners of the Alms-House and Bridewell, dated 1791 August 22 to 1797 October 16, record the proceedings of the Commissioners' weekly meetings at the Almshouse, and quarterly meetings attended by supervising New York City officials. Proceedings concern the Commissioners' management of the two institutions and outdoor relief services during a period of growing need, but are chiefly devoted to Almshouse affairs and their review of individual cases of indoor and outdoor relief. Other documented responsibilities include the oversight of medical services provided, and the indenture of poor children as apprentices, especially the investigation of cases of their ill-usage or misbehavior. The name of Samuel Dodge, keeper of the Almshouse, appears on the inside front cover.

The minutes document the Commissioners' oversight of the "support, government and employment" of persons under their care at the Almshouse and Bridewell. Outdoor relief activities include the distribution of food and fuel during winter months and visits to the poor at home, reported as needing temporary assistance.

General administrative concerns include the allocation of space to deal with overcrowding and other needs; contracting with provision suppliers; hiring and management of staff, including apothecaries and physicians; oversight of medical care at the institutions; temporary closure of the workhouse; and management of the Almshouse school. There are also brief accountings of expenditures and projected costs for the Almshouse and Bridewell, and sales of workhouse products such as oakum.

The minutes record the circumstances of many individual cases requiring decisions by the Commissioners or further investigation by committee members. The binding out of children as apprentices and cases of their ill-usage or misbehavior are particularly well-documented; the boarding of infants with wet-nurses is also mentioned. A number of cases are reported where ill and impoverished persons living at home are given temporary aid. The Commissioners also approved travel

expenses for Almshouse residents wishing to leave the city, and sought to charge persons capable of paying for the City's support, either for themselves, or persons for whom they were responsible. This included obtaining payment or indemnifying bonds from masters of vessels leaving sailors or passengers in port. In just a few instances the minutes record the Commissioners' review of medical care given to particular Almshouse residents, since amputations could not take place without their approval. The cases of black men, women and children in a variety of circumstances are also encountered in the minutes. The situation of persons in the Bridewell is only occasionally discussed.

Brief summaries of committee reports are sometimes present. The Commissioners' report to City government on the state of the Almshouse and Bridewell appears in the entry dated February 2, 1795; it was also entered under that date in the City's Common Council minutes (published 1917).

Key Terms

Subjects

Almshouses -- New York (State) -- New York
Apprentices -- New York (State) -- New York
Child labor -- New York (State) -- New York
Correctional institutions -- New York (State) -- New York
Indentured servants -- New York (State) -- New York
Poor -- New York (State) -- New York
Poor children -- New York (State) -- New York
Public welfare -- New York (State) -- New York

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Minutes (administrative records)

Geographic Names

New York (N.Y.) -- Social conditions