

A Badge of Shame: Poor relief and communal life in the colonial Chesapeake

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While preparing the annual levy in November of 1767, the county court of Talbot County, MD ordered all persons receiving poor relief to "wear a badge of painted canvas, on [which] shall be painted Talbot County in red letters on a white ground, to be affixed on their outward garment and upon their right arm." Anyone who failed or refused to display their badge would automatically lose his or her pension and face whipping. The county commissioned a local man to "make & paint one hundred of such badges of about 6 inches by four."¹

Scarlet letters may seem more at home in Hawthorne's New England than in eighteenth-century Maryland, but the practice of marking the poor became widespread in the mid-eighteenth-century Chesapeake. When the Maryland Assembly overhauled its poor-relief system in May of 1768, it followed the lead of Talbot County by requiring individuals who received public relief to display a badge on their shoulder with "a large Roman P" in red or blue, as well as their county of residence.² Twelve years earlier, Virginia had introduced a similar law ordering anyone who received relief to wear a badge " with the name of the parish to which he or

¹ Talbot County Court (Minutes) Friday, Nov. 13, 1767, MSA C1891-1, MdHR 9745. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, MD.

² "An Act for the Relief of the Poor..." *Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, 1766-1768*, ed. J. Hall Pleasants (Baltimore: 1944), reproduced in William Hand Browne, Edward C. Papenfuse, et. al. eds., *Archives of Maryland*, Volume 61, 486 (Baltimore and Annapolis, Md., 1883-). Cited (hereinafter cited as *Archives of Maryland Online*). This series is ongoing and available on line at <http://aomol.msa.maryland.gov/> where volumes, collectively or individually, can be searched electronically.

she belongs, cut either in blue, red, or green cloth."³ Virginia's law not only stipulated punishment for those who failed to wear their badges but also for "any person, not entitled to relief" who "presumed to wear such badge."⁴

These new regulations reflected the anxiety of colonial elites about increasing poverty in the mid-eighteenth century and, more acutely, resentment towards the growing cost of supporting the poor. Both Maryland and Virginia officials feared the traditional relief system could not handle rising poverty. A 1748 Virginia law sought to restrict movement of "wandering persons" who "frequently strole from one county to another, neglecting to labour."⁵ The colony's subsequent 1755 poor law went even further by claiming that "the number of poor people hath of late years much increased throughout this colony" and sought to curb the "great mischiefs arising from such numbers of unemployed poor" by marking all pensioners with badges and opening poorhouses.⁶ One year earlier, Maryland's governor, Horatio Sharpe, lamented the "Excessive charge and burthen this Country is at present Subjected to by the great Increase of Pensioners in Several of Our Counties."⁷ He argued that the "distribution of the great Sums annually collected for the Relief of the poor, as it is now made, instead of being an Encouragement to and a reward for Industry, proves too frequently an Incitement only to Debauchery and Idleness." By introducing poor relief reforms, both colonies moved away from traditional patterns of care, mainly out-of-door relief and direct payments to the indigent, and instead encouraged the construction of almshouses and the centralization of relief services.

³ "An Act for employing and better maintaining the Poor, " *The Statutes at Large; Being a collection of the Laws of Virginia*, Vol. 6, ed. William Waller Hening (Richmond: 1819), 449.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Act for the better securing the payment of Levies, and Restraint of Vagrants, and for making provision for the poor," *The Statutes at Large...*, Vol. 6, ed. Hening, 29.

⁶ "An Act for employing and better maintaining the Poor, " *The Statutes at Large...*, Vol. 6, ed. Hening, 449.

⁷ "Address of Governor Sharpe, May 8, 1754," *Archives of Maryland Online*, Volume 50, Page 449.

Today, I will investigate these reforms to the welfare system in the mid-eighteenth-century Chesapeake. I will begin by exploring the traditional model of poor relief practiced in the early eighteenth century and then consider how it changed in decades before the Revolution. This paper has grown out of my dissertation about the relationship of church and state in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake, and my comments today will attempt to bring together some of the existing scholarship with my archival research to offer a fresh perspective on public relief in the colonial Chesapeake.⁸

Watchful, vigilant, tightly-knit – these are not words we typically associate with the tobacco colonies. Generations of scholars emphasized the independent, greedy, and dispersed nature of Chesapeake society. But, surviving poor relief records found in Virginian Vestry books and Maryland County Court records highlight the strength of local institutions and the presence of a robust poor relief system that reflected and reinforced communal bonds. In Virginia, as in England, Anglican parishes oversaw poor relief. County courts administered poor relief in

⁸ There is a surprising lack of literature about poor relief in Maryland and Virginia. Alan Kulikoff offers a detailed description of the poor relief system in the colonial Chesapeake in his discussion of communal life and emphasizes its "debasement" of the poor. My interpretation diverges from Kulikoff by emphasizing the sense of entitlement felt by the poor to relief. Alan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Zachary Ryan Calvo offers a detailed study of Prince George's County and the transition from out of door relief to poorhouses. Calvo, "From Poor Relief to the Poorhouse: The Response to Poverty in Prince George's County, Maryland, 1710-1770," *The Maryland Historical Magazine*, Winter 1998: 393-428. The glaring absence of discussion of relief is most noticeable in the literature on Anglicanism in the Chesapeake. For example, Rhys Isaac's account in the *Transformation of Virginia* devotes one paragraph to poor relief. *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Published by the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, VA) (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 65. While vestry records reflect the importance of poor relief to the vestry's civic duties, very few accounts of the established church emphasize this role. John Nelson offered a much-needed corrective to the surprising absence in his masterful study of Virginian parishes provides a thorough description of the poor relief system as part of the civic role of the established church. *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Also useful is the work of Clive Raymond Hallman, Jr., "The Vestry as a Unit of Local Government in Colonial Virginia," (Ph.D. diss., The University of Georgia, 1987).

Maryland before the colony established the Anglican Church in the late seventeenth century and remained in charge of public welfare throughout the eighteenth century.⁹

The poor relief system in both Maryland and Virginia morphed from sporadic relief payments made by counties and parishes to a formalized welfare system in the late seventeenth century. The availability of public assistance reflected a shared assumption that the community had a moral responsibility to support its needy. As one 1727 Maryland statute expressed it, we are all "Obliged by the Laws of God and man to be particularly careful and tender" to "poor helpless people."¹⁰ Petitioners for relief across the Chesapeake invoked this sense of Christian charity when presenting their claims. Take, for example, Marylander Francis Bensten Senior. When asking for support from the Somerset County Court, he declared "it hath please[d] Almighty God both by Sickness & fire to afflict your petitioner So that he is now reduced to a Low & Bed rid Condition..." Bensten "humbly" reminded the Justices of the Peace before him that "it hath been the Christian practice of all Christian Nations & Scocieties to help and relieve Such persons as have been known, to be good and Orderly."¹¹ He hoped that as "one of the oldest housekeepers on this Shore," their "Christian Charity may Soe farr extend as to Some relief."

However, as the petition of Virginian Samuel Ferguson made clear, relying on the ideal of Christian charity for help did not always suffice. Ferguson's request for relief explained that

⁹ Establishment in Maryland was a protracted process that began after the Glorious Revolution in 1692 and was finally formalized in 1702. The Maryland Assembly introduced a series of acts establishing the church that were disallowed by the Board of Trade. Indeed, the transfer of civic duties to ecclesiastical bodies proved to be one of the most important sticking points in debates over the bills. In 1702, the legislature conceded to a more limited form of establishment that left the civic power of county courts relatively intact. See "An Act for the Service of Almighty GOD, and the Establishment of the Protestant Religion in this Province," *Archives of Maryland Online*, Volume 75, Page 78; "An Act for the Establishment of Religious Worship in this Province According to the Church of England: and for the Maintenance of Ministers," *Archives of Maryland Online*, Volume 24, Page 265.

¹⁰ "A Message from the Lower House by James Harris Esqr & Mr. Key," October 23, 1728 "*Archives of Maryland Online*, Volume 36, Page 132.

¹¹ Somerset County Judicial Records, 1691-1692, *Archives of Maryland Online*, Volume 405, 132.

he was "by reason of his age... and weakness... entirely unable to" support himself. However, he went to note, "when he applies to Christian neighbours they seem not willing to supply him but in the Legal way altho' they look upon him as a real object of charity..." Ferguson's neighbors, though perhaps viewing him sympathetically, deferred to "legal" public relief system to determine whether he deserved their support. Christian charity sometimes had to be compelled by the power of the state.

The willingness of the public to accept its duty of Christian charity seems to have been tested past its limits in the mid-eighteenth century as costs rose. Poor relief was a significant annual expenditure for communities in the colonial Chesapeake. In the 1730s, Lynnhaven Parish allocated roughly 10% of its budget to poor relief. By the 1770s, that proportion had tripled to 31% of the annual budget. The parish had supported only 13 persons in 1735, but by 1770, it supported 32 pensioners a year.¹² Prince George's County, Maryland had dedicated 17% of its levy to the relief of the poor in 1735; that figure swelled to 58% in 1760 and stood at 51% in 1770.¹³ The number of relief recipients grew from 46 to 127 people between 1735 and 1770. Prince George's County oversaw a larger population than Lynnhaven Parish, but, even adjusted for the number of tithables, the Maryland County outspent the Virginian both in the percentage of its budget going to poor relief and the amount spent per pensioner.

There are several possible explanations for the discrepancy in the amount spent per person between the Maryland county and the Virginian parish. To begin with, parishes often received charitable bequests, including slaves and land. These funds allowed parishes to provide

¹² Lynnhaven Parish, Vestry Book, LVA, 20.

¹³ All figures related to the annual levies for Prince George's County cited in this paper come from the manuscript copies of the two annual levy books of the Prince George's County Court at the Maryland State Archives. See Prince George's County Court, 1734-1760 (Levy Book A) MSA C1245-1, MdHR 6177, MSA, passim; Prince George's County Court, 1760-1794 (Levy Book B) MSA C1245-2, MdHR 6178-1 MSA, passim

material support to the poor, in the form of foodstuffs or tobacco produced on parish land by enslaved men and women, without increasing the tax burden of the annual levy. In 1761 Lynnhaven Parish sold off a large parcel of land it had received as a bequest and used the money to purchase "young slaves for the support of the said parish."¹⁴ That the parish purchased several slaves in the same year that it opened its poorhouse on a fifty-acre tract of land was no coincidence. The labor of these enslaved men and women on the farm at the poorhouse provided food and income for poor white parishioners.

Moreover, the churchwarden system of the Virginian parish meant that funds were distributed differently than in Maryland counties. The vestry (the twelve gentlemen who oversaw the parish) granted relief requests at an annual meeting. However, one or two members of the vestry were chosen to serve as churchwardens. They were responsible for attending to the needs of the poor throughout the year. In addition to annual payments directly to needy parishioners or caretakers after the annual levy, churchwardens dispensed additional necessary funds, purchased food and other provisions, and paid for medical care. For example, Major Thomas Walke served as churchwarden from 1750-53. He was reimbursed each year for at least 1,000 pounds of tobacco each November, presumably for the money he had spent out of his own pocket as churchwarden the previous year.¹⁵ The Lynnhaven churchwardens' accounts were often not listed as specific appropriations for the poor in the annual accounts; rather, they often appeared as large reimbursements to the personal accounts of individual churchwardens. This system relied on the largesse of churchwardens and their willingness to extend the parish credit throughout the year but leaves a difficult trail to follow in the records.

¹⁴ Lynnhaven Parish, Vestry Book, LVA, 55.

¹⁵ Lynnhaven Parish, Vestry Book, LVA, 50-54.

In both colonies, elites served as gatekeepers to public assistance. Vestrymen in Virginia and Justices of the Peace in Maryland represented the upper echelons of local society and exercised a significant amount of personal discretion over the administration of relief funds to the poor. Those seeking relief had to petition, typically in person, to justify their requests. Effective petitions tended to emphasize dependency and a lack of culpability for one's circumstances. For example, take the appeal of Isabella Miller, who appeared before the Frederick County Court in June of 1765 to ask for relief for her "pitiful condition." Having already lost one leg to necrosis, Miller explained that she was now in danger "of loosing the other leg by the same effect," and "was not in a capacity to get her living." Her petition was granted, and she received 600 pounds of tobacco.¹⁶ On the other hand, Timothy Calyhorn had less success. He petitioned the court for relief in 1758 after suffering "the misfortune of being drove from my habitation by the Indians."¹⁷ In rejecting his claim, the court showed that hardship alone did not secure support. Calyhorn may have been unlucky, but he still had the ability to labor and had not mentioned any dependents; thus, he did not warranted assistance.

The distribution of poor relief reflected and reinforced the hierarchical and racialized boundaries of this slave society. Public assistance was supposed to cover those without a social guardian overseeing and providing for them. Therefore, indentured servants were deemed

¹⁶ *This Was the Life: Excerpts from the Judgment Records of Frederick County Maryland, 1748-1765*, ed. Millard Milburn Rice (Clearfield, Inc: Baltimore, Maryland), 256.

¹⁷ *This was the Life*, ed. Rice, 188.

ineligible for public support.¹⁸ Counties would revoke support from white men and women who were discovered to be indentured servants after receiving relief.¹⁹

Indeed, the system drew stark racial boundaries around the local community. Free African-Americans are noticeably absent from the poor relief rolls, although theoretically eligible for support. There is only one recorded instance in which a black individual received financial support from Lynnhaven Parish in the fifty-two year years of poor relief records of the parish; in 1773, the parish paid William Capps for keeping "Mary Lester (Orphan of James Lester) and her negro one year."²⁰ Prince George's County provided relief payments to white men and women for "keeping" or maintain "mulatto" children. Presumably, these children became indentured servants once deemed old enough to work conjecture supported by their disappearance from the poor relief rolls after a year or two of support. Indeed, there was only one instance in forty years of relief records when a black adult is recorded as receiving assistance at the public expense, which came in 1740 when a physician was paid for providing costly medical care to a slave. Indeed, that slave belonged to a Justice of the Peace, Mr. Blandford. The entry on the levy lists additional information, including which other Justice of the Peace signed off on the expense. The unusual detail in this entry reflected how uncommon this occurrence was. The only time a non-white adult received relief was in 1748 when the county paid "Wm Gathin Indian for a coffin etc. for a white man named Peter." Though the circumstances were different on these occasions, they all reflected how public funds were used to maintain normative racial hierarchies

¹⁸ Slave-owners often applied for exemption from paying taxes on slaves who were unable to work in the same way that poor persons applied for relief. Though outside the scope of this paper, the relationship between these two types of relief petitions deserves future scrutiny.

¹⁹ For example, in 1734 Priscilla Athy received medical care from Doctor James Boswell, which cost Prince George's County 265 pounds of tobacco. The clerk of the county made sure to note next to the appropriation, "Not to be paid if a servant at the Time." Prince George's County, Levy Book A, 17.

²⁰ *Lynnhaven Parish Vestry Book*, 120.

as white residents remained the recipients, either indirectly or directly, of financial assistance and retained social power in these exchanges.²¹ By largely excluding black men and women, whether free or enslaved, from access to the social safety, this system equated race with communal belonging and access to public services.

There were two types of relief recipients — those making occasional requests and annual pensioners. The occasional requests came from men and women who had provided goods or services to poor neighbors and sought reimbursement. There were claims submitted for rent payments, housing, clothes, beddings, food, drink, and transportation for the poor. But, the most common and costly type of reimbursement was for medical care. Public funding for medical care was well-established in both colonial Virginia and Maryland. Medical care constituted one of the more expensive parts of the poor relief system. Treating a handle of very sick patients could amount from anywhere to a third or a half of the annual spending on relief. Between 1737 and 1767, Lynnhaven spent 23% of its poor relief budget on medical care.

In the traditional out-of-door relief system, medical practitioners petitioned for repayment for services and goods. Physicians charging for specialized treatments included bleeding, purging, salivating, and amputations often appeared in annual levies. Women acting as midwives and nurses were also reimbursed for their services. Barbara Keeling and Frances Petree, for "service in attendance," which suggests that they acted as midwives or nurses. Indeed, Keeling received payment from the parish every year between 1743 and 1753 for nursing or looking after her fellow parishioners.²² Claimants often presented dramatic accounts replete with gory details. For example, when Sarah Turner petitioned Augusta Parish to pay her for taking care of an ill

²¹ Prince George's County, Levy Book A, 547.

²² Lynnhaven Parish, Vestry Book, LVA, 40-55.

neighbor, she vividly wrote that the “smell was such as no person could bear the room.”

Requests for the repayment of medical fees were coupled with requests for the repayment of funeral costs after the sick individual had died. When Nathan Gilliland requested payment from Augusta, he explained that he had “attended William Scott in a deep Consumption... [and was] obliged to sit up day & Night, washing his most Loathsome cloaths, 7 or 8 times a night for the space of 23 days.”²³ After the poor man had passed away, Gilliland supplied his funeral needs. Gilliland provided food and candles, dug the grave, and even made beer for the occasion. He charged the parish for 2.5 bushels of malt, 8 pounds of butter, and his efforts in caring for the sick man. This request, like many others, showed that community-members demanded payment for their labor, as well as goods they provided. In a region with dispersed settlement, and particularly in a western county like Augusta, poor relief provisions helped incentivize neighborly conduct.

Annual pensioners, on the other hand, received payment every year for a chronic medical condition or a social status that entitled them to public support. In 1760, 77% of Prince George's poor-relief recipients were annual pensioners.²⁴ That same year, in Lynnhaven Parish, Virginia, 77% of relief recipients were also yearly pensioners.²⁵ Comments that a pensioner was blind, dumb, crippled, or mentally ill are frequent in the records of annual pensioners. Elderly, single women were the most frequent recipients of long-term pensions. Widows often gave no additional explanation for their requests; their status as social dependents was *prima facie* accepted and relief granted. Martha Wilson, a widow in Prince George's County, Maryland,

²³ Augusta Parish, Vestry Book, LVA, 362.

²⁴ Prince George's County Court, Levy Book B, MSA, 1-6

²⁵ Lynnhaven Parish, Vestry Book, LVA, 79-81.

received assistance every year from 1740-1770.²⁶ Mary Broughton, a widowed mother of three, received a house from the parish, free medical care, as well as an annual pension every year from 1752-1770 from Lynnhaven Parish, Virginia.²⁷

Some scholarship has described the petitioning system as an exercise in the elite's debasement of the poor and an expression of the hegemonic gentry's control over society.²⁸ While the system certainly maintained social hierarchies, the petitioners' own words also expressed a sense of expectation and deservedness. For example, take the case of Esther Mattew, an elderly widow responsible for the care of her disabled granddaughter, Esther Leach. Mattew received an annual pension of 1600 pounds of tobacco to support herself and her granddaughter in 1748.²⁹ Widow Mattew heartily protested when the court revoked her granddaughter's pension six years later.³⁰ The aging grandmother appeared before the court to fight back, declaring that while it had "been represented to Your Worships that the aforesaid Est[h]er Leach is in a capacity of getting her living by her labor and in consequence," the court had been misinformed. She was there personally to "certify... that the aforesaid Esther Leach is actually a lunatick and not capable of supporting herself by her labor as was insinuated." She had marshaled the support of her community and presented a petition of signatures backing up their claim. Her appeal proved successful, and their full allowance was restored. When she appeared in the future, her case was recorded simply as a "renewal of her pension," which was granted annually.³¹ Her bold

²⁶ Prince George's County Court, Levy Book A and Levy Book B, MSA, passim.

²⁷ Lynnhaven Parish, Vestry book, LVA, passim.

²⁸ This characterization is particularly strong in Kulikoff's discussion of the relief system in *Tobacco and Slaves*, 215-6; 297-9 and in Rhys Isaac's *The transformation of Virginia*, 65.

²⁹ Prince George's County, Levy Book A, 546. Frederick County split from Prince George's County in 1748. The Mattews (also listed as Mattues) had received relief from PG in 1748 and the women became pensioners of the newly formed Frederick County ever year thereafter.

³⁰ *This was the Life*, 155.

³¹ *This was the Life*, 187; 261.

challenge to the county court reflected her confidence that she and Esther were entitled to public assistance. Addressing the elite body before her, the widow expressed assurance, rather than deference.

As the eighteenth century wore on, spending on poor relief rose. Both Prince George's County and Lynnhaven Parish had begun to spend a much higher proportion of their annual budget on poor relief by 1750 than they had two decades earlier. By the 1750s, Lynnhaven was spending anywhere from 20-40% of its levy annually on supporting the poor, which was a fourfold increase from two decades earlier.³² Prince George's spent 58% of its budget on poor relief in 1760, compared to only 17% in 1735.

Contemporaries blamed this increase on vagrancy and the arrival of poor outsiders, there are other possible explanations. One possible reason was rising life expectancy. As colonists began living longer and having more children in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, there would have been a larger aging population by the mid-eighteenth century.³³ Another explanation for the ever-increasing sense of crisis could have stemmed from the growing lack of resources, particularly land, in these eastern areas of the Chesapeake colonies. Tenancy increased in both Maryland and Virginia in the decade before the Revolution as young adults and newly-freed indentured servants faced land scarcity land.³⁴

Indeed, this perceived crisis may not have been as severe as was claimed. The public supported an increasing number of pensioners, but the ratio of pensioners to the population of

³² Lynnhaven Parish, Vestry book, LVA, passim.

³³ Daniel Blake Smith, "Mortality and Family in the Colonial Chesapeake," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Winter, 1978), pp. 403-427.

³⁴ For discussions of rising tenancy and land scarcity in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake, see Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 428-432; Steven Sarson, "Landlessness and Tenancy in Early National Prince George's County, Maryland," *WMQ*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Jul. 2000), pp. 569-598; Billy G. Smith, *Down and Out in Early America* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 96.

tithables did not increase much. In Prince George's, the ratio of pensioners to tithables reached as high as 2.1% in 1750 and 1770, but between 1755-1765 it was 1.5%, not much higher than the 1.3% ratio in 1735.³⁵ Interestingly, Lynnhaven's ratio of pensioners peaked in the same years - in 1750 and again in 1770. But, in Lynnhaven, the number of pensioners per tithables decreased in the 1750s and 1760s.³⁶ The inconsistency in these figures made it difficult for local governments to predict relief expenditures from year to year.

The increased financial burden of the system did not stem from a massive rise in the number of paupers receiving relief but from increases in spending-per-person. The average support payment per pensioner went up over the course of the eighteenth century, from 229 pounds of tobacco per person in 1735 to 486 pounds of tobacco in 1750 in Lynnhaven. Counties were funding each pensioner more generously even as the real price of tobacco climbed. Pensioners were receiving significantly more money by mid-century than they had earlier. The perception of increased poverty from the very real increases in spending per-person.

In response to complaints about the growing cost of poor relief from counties, the Maryland Assembly conducted a colony-wide audit of poor relief expenditures in 1753.³⁷ Their report echoed local concerns in both Maryland and Virginia about the cost of traditional methods and ushered in an era of changes to the poor relief system focused on cutting costs. Aimed at controlling the cost of relief, these reforms amounted to a significant overhaul of the poor relief system.

³⁵ Prince George's County Court, Levy Book A and Levy Book B, MSA, passim.

³⁶ Lynnhaven Parish, Vestry book, LVA, passim.

³⁷ Their report compiled, "A List of the Amount of Allowances to Pensioners in the several Counties, in the Year 1753: Saint Mary's County, 48,536; Charles County, 62,200; Calvert County, 16,300; Prince George's County, 55,030; Anne Arundel County, 79,818; Baltimore County, 61,105; Frederick County, 9,118; Cecil County, 28,615; Kent County, 61,624; Queen- Anne's County, 69,318; Talbot County, 49,795; Dorchester County, 32,192; Somerset County, 19,170; Worcester County, 11,921. Total: 604,742."

To begin with, communities began requiring relief recipients to wear visible badges during the mid-eighteenth century. Marking pensioners did not immediately lessen the number of relief recipients, but this scheme certainly helped clarify which jurisdiction had financial responsibility for certain individuals, a growing concern as the numbers of the poor rose. While removals were not common in the Chesapeake, Virginian parishes did often sue one another as communities disputed who was responsible for providing relief to a particular person.³⁸ Marking the poor by their parish would have decreased the likelihood of these suits. In addition to these badges, there were two other significant changes to the welfare system — the hiring of salaried public physicians and the construction of poor houses.

Counties in Maryland and parishes in Virginia also started hiring physicians on an annual basis to treat the poor in the 1750s and 1760s. By employing a single physician to care for the public, it seems that communities sought to minimize the per-visit cost and standardize care. Frederick County, Maryland hired Doctor James Brand in August of 1758 at an annual rate of 55 pounds of Maryland Current money for "his medicines and attendances."³⁹ In return, Brand was expected to provide "an account of the same medicines by him expended on account of said pensioners at the same price that he supplys others at." Both "County pensioners and such other persons...deemed proper objects of charity" could be referred to the doctor by a magistrate. Lynnhaven Parish in Virginia likewise hired Doctor Christopher Wright in 1757 "to attend the sick belonging to the parish" for an annual salary of 18 pounds current money.⁴⁰

³⁸ I explore the topic at length in my dissertation. Lawsuits between parishes over the cost of caring for individual parishioners rose in the 1740s and 1750s.

³⁹ *This was the Life*, 184.

⁴⁰ Lynnhaven Parish, Vestry Book, LVA, 73.

However, spending patterns changed very little as a result of this new program in Lynnhaven. The parish allocated on average of 23.8% of its poor relief budget to medical care after hiring a single physician, compared to 23.3% in the decade before this change.⁴¹ Hiring one public physician affected the way in which medical care was delivered, though. The midwives and neighbors who had played such a crucial role in providing communal care in the early eighteenth century ceased to be reimbursed by the public. It is difficult to know how this change would have affected the patients themselves. On the one hand, limiting services to only one approved practitioner might have lowered accessibility and decreased the total number of patients. However, pre-negotiating a capped salary may have allowed the parish or county to provide medical care to more patients.

Perhaps the most dramatic change to the welfare system was the opening of poor-houses across the Chesapeake. Twenty-two parishes in Virginia undertook plans to open poor houses between the passage of the 1755 Poor Relief Act and the outbreak of the Revolution.⁴² Nine of Maryland's sixteen counties petitioned for permission poorhouses in the six years after the colony passed an act encouraging their construction in 1768.⁴³ By moving poor relief from private homes into centralized locations, the public sought to reduce the "many inconveniences & high charges," of poor relief.⁴⁴ In Prince George's County, the construction of a poorhouse in 1770 decreased the overall cost of relief spending. The county court was able to lower their total expenditures for poor relief by more than 23,000 pounds of tobacco between 1765 and 1775, a

⁴¹ Lynnhaven Parish, Vestry Book, LVA, passim.

⁴² Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 22.

⁴³ Anne Arundel County (1768); Prince George's County (1768); Worcester County (1768); Frederick County (1768); Charles County (1768); Queen Anne's (1769); Saint Mary's (1773); Baltimore County (1773); Talbot (1774).

⁴⁴ Augusta Parish, Vestry Book, LVA, 358.

decrease of 28%.⁴⁵ Indeed, by 1773, Lynnhaven Parish's spending on poor relief per tithable had surpassed Prince George's for the first time in nearly sixty years. Most importantly for the county court, the Justices made only four appropriations for relief in the annual levy compared to the 116 it had made in 1770.⁴⁶ They paid out one lump sum to the Trustees of the Poor House and only made three out-of-door payments. By delegating the responsibility of hearing petitions to the commissioners of the poor house, the Justices reduced their workload significantly and the visibility of poverty before the court.

However, poorhouses had mixed results. In Lynnhaven Parish, the poorhouse sat on a fifty-acre farm purchased in 1761. The parish purchased four slaves to work on the land, hired an overseer, and built a house with several outbuildings. The project lowered costs initially, but poor relief spending ballooned in the late 1760s and early 1770s. It seems that the parish had difficulty compelling longtime pensioners to relocate and perhaps saw less of a reason to force those deemed unable to work to move to the farm. The parish, then, continued to pay a significant percentage of pensioners out-of-door relief payments while also bearing the cost of supporting the new poorhouse. The workhouse built by Augusta Parish in 1766 ran into similar problems.⁴⁷ In addition to paying off the cost of purchasing land, investing in livestock, paying a caretaker, and constructing a house and stables, the vestry was still fielding dozens of petitions for the costs of funerals, short-term care, and medical care for parishioners not living at the poor house. Despite their attempt to centralize relief services, the Augusta Parish Vestry could not

⁴⁵ The 1765, the county spent 59044 pounds of tobacco on poor relief. Valued at a price of 1.77 pence Virginia current money per pound, this sum amounted to 104,507.88 pence Virginia current money. Compare this to the 1774 figure, after the opening of the poor house, when the county spent only 36,348 pounds of tobacco, or 756,03.84 pence Virginia current money when adjusted to the 1774 price per pound, 2.08 pence Virginia current money per pound.

⁴⁶ Prince George's County Court, Levy Book B, 174-178; 230-231.

⁴⁷ Augusta Parish, Vestry Book, LVA, 484.

easily eradicate longstanding customs of poor relief in the area. The vestry closed the poor house, declaring it had become a "burden" and returned to the traditional system of "letting out of the poor... to the lowest bidder."⁴⁸

In Queen Anne's County, Maryland, the court's decision to build a poorhouse and centralize welfare services in 1769 faced significant backlash from the local community. The Justices had hired Doctor Joseph Haslett in November of 1769, "to receive the Poor of that County under his Care, and provide for them sufficient Meat, Drink, Cloaths, Washing, Bedding, Houseroom, Medicines, Attendance, and every other Necessary of Life, for one Year from thence, for the Quantity of One hundred and thirty thousand Pounds of Tobacco."⁴⁹ However, a group of Queen Anne's residents submitted a petition directly to the colonial assembly to protest what they saw as a "new and unwarranted Method, of providing for the Poor, who cannot... be drawn and collected, especially without their own Consent, to one Place or common Receptacle."⁵⁰ This complaint reflected the anger of pensioners of being forcibly removed to Dr. Haslett's home. In describing the plan as new, unwarranted, and "illegal," this petition amounted to a popular denunciation of the poorhouse.⁵¹

In marking the poor, codifying medical care, and attempting to force pensioners to move to poorhouses, elites in charge of local government tried to exercise increased control over the poor but results were mixed. By continuing to petition for out-of-door relief, refusing to move to the poorhouse, and sending protests to the assembly, community-members undercut centralization efforts and mounted effective resistance. However, the results of the reforms of the

⁴⁸ Augusta Parish, Vestry Book, LVA, 431; 465.

⁴⁹ Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, 1769-1770, *Archives of Maryland Online*, Volume 62, Page 416.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

1750s and 1760s were mixed. Both Lynnhaven Parish and Prince George's County continued to spend large sums annual on local welfare programs. In 1774, Lynnhaven Parish spent 36% of its budget on poor relief and Prince George's County spent 30%.⁵² Communities continued to tax themselves at high rates in order to provide relief to the needy.

While the amount spent may not have changed dramatically, the experience of receiving relief certainly did. I have argued that petitioners in the traditional relief system expressed assurance that they were entitled to communal support in their requests. Following the creation of poorhouses, these recipients were forcibly relocated and placed under the care of an overseer. They forced to wear badges and lived under an increasingly bureaucratic system that removed them from the community through material and spatial means. Whether or not they were successful in lowering the cost of relief, these reforms reflected significant changes to come.

Looking closely at relief in colonial Maryland and Virginia adds nuance to our understanding both of poor relief in early America. The rise of poorhouses and other attempts to centralize welfare occurred as early as the 1750s in the dispersed communities of the Chesapeake. Narratives of welfare and relief often concentrate on urban centers, particularly in the northeast. Moreover, much of the excellent scholarship on poor relief focuses on developments after the Revolution. This story extends the narrative of poor relief both chronologically and geographically by emphasizing events in rural areas of the colonial South. Furthermore, the history of relief at once reinforces and dramatically changes our impression of the colonial Chesapeake. To be sure, these welfare programs further cemented racial categories and reinforced the values of this slave society by denying black men and women from the benefits of civic life. However, we also find strong local institutions and durable communal

⁵² Prince George's County Court, Levy Book B, 230-233.

bonds in records of relief. The robust, involved nature of local government and the increasing sophistication of public efforts suggests an intensity of communal life and institutions often absent from narratives of the tobacco colonies.