

Indigent Indian Women: Example

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“Citizenship, Property, Identity & Representation: the Historical Journey of Southern New England’s Native Peoples

Natives, particularly Indian women, without means, falling sick, nursed in their terminal illnesses and buried by English residents of Bay towns, many of whom sought compensation for services provided, are examples of Indians living on the edge.

Although on July 8, 1700, bills were proposed to the legislature to prevent abuse of Indians in being bound out to English residents to satisfy debts, and as late as 1748, for example, the General Court established a committee to frame legislation for the relief of aged, infirm and destitute Indians,¹ indigent Natives appear more and more frequently as part of the social landscape of eighteenth-century Massachusetts.

In 1725 Boston received compensation from the General Court for “Nursing, Subsisting, Watching, etc. on two Indians,” who died at the town almshouse.²

In April 1729, an Indian woman who sometimes lived at Natick, Christian or Christian Ompatowen took ill at the home of Eleazar Rider in neighboring Sherburn. After the Indian’s death Rider claimed he was owed £22. 19s. 6d., for “the Sickness & Funeral of an Indian Woman named Christian, belonging to Natick, who came accidentally to his House, where she was in a very ill state of Health,” but since permission has been given to sell ninety acres at Natick “which was the Estate of Samuel Umpatowen deceased Father of said Christian,” he requested payment. ³ In August of the same year, Dr. Joshua Wheat petitioned the General Court, claiming he owed for Samuel Umpatawen of Natick Indian “being sick was under his Care for six months in the Year 1719, as also his Family, there was much

¹ Mass. Archives, 30: 458a, 460; Ibid., 31:614, action from Jan. 15, 1749

² House Journal, 6:191, from Dec. 16, 1724

³ The General Court ordered the sum of £22 19s 6d be paid out some £107 in the hands of Jonathan Plympton & John Death from the estate of Umpatowen. Passed, April 9, 1729,. Legislative Records of the Council 14: 215; House Journal, :9, Acts & Resolves, 11: 390

Sickness.” Informed that there was land belonging to the Indian’s estate, Wheat successfully requested £29. 19s. 6d. for “Medicines & Attendance.”⁴

In September 1729 John Matthews of Southborough obtained payment from the General Court for medical necessities provided to an Indian woman. He maintained that Amy Printer Jr., of Grafton, “having wounded his Wife in the Heel by the Brace of Bullets & shattered several Bones, the Petitioner was sent for to Hassanamisco to take Care of her, and after fifteen Journeys thither & a great deal of Pains & Charges he made a thorough Cure of the said Wound; And for as much as the said Printer is not able to pay the Charge of the Cure.”⁵ In the next year, on Sept. 25, 1730, the General Court awarded 200 acres of “unappropriated land” to Benjamin Allen of Bridgewater, a clerk, who claimed he had provided assistance to an elderly and infirm Indian woman. His petition to the legislature alleged that “one Ruth Nusuck an Indian Squaw being old & sickly, he supported her for many years in his House at considerable Charge, In requital of which she conveyed to him a Deed of a Tract of Land of five miles long & three miles broad” north of Brookfield. Since “most” of the tract is “taken up by Grants of this Court,” he had requested an equivalent allotment of land.⁶

In 1735, Samuel Allen was reimbursed for care provided a lame Indian and his mother. Isaac Royall applied to the General Court in 1741 for assistance provided to Zachariah Quock, an Indian resident of Stoughton, charges including medical and funeral expenses.⁷

At Dedham, for example, the town attempted to assist Native people in need: in 1740, a resident was reimbursed for the funeral of “an Indian;” in 1742, town physician Joseph Wright was paid for “charges & care” of Hannah Friget, a blind elderly Indian woman; in 1744, Benjamin Fairbanks was paid for “Care & Charge” for a deceased “Indian;” in 1764 a town resident nursed and boarded the Indian Betty Comacher, the town also

⁴ Dr. Joshua Wheat’s request, granted Aug. 28, 1729, Legislative Records of the Council, 14: 252, 292, 314; House Journal, 19,27,67], Acts & Resolves, 11: 425.

⁵ John Matthews petition, passed Sept. 5, 1729. Matthews had requested £25, his award for £18, Legislative Records of the Council, 14:293,314; House Journal, 78,79], Acts & Resolves, 11: 430

⁶ For Benjamin Allen’s petition, Acts & Resolves, 11: 102; House Journal: 91, 102

⁷ For Allen petition, Mass. Archives, 245: Folio 147, Doc. 742. Mass. Archives, 31:310-311, Royall petition of March 26, 1741.

paying for her funeral expenses, in the same year assisting Patience Pegan, “an Indian Squaw” and her infant child called a “pappuse.”⁸

In 1741, the town of Springfield through agent Joseph Pynchon was seeking reimbursement for the care of Ephraim, an impoverished Indian.⁹ At Dorchester, in 1748, Sarah Quill, an Indian thought to be originally from Sandwich on Cape Cod, received aid from Dorchester’s selectmen and was buried at town expense.¹⁰

At a Town Meeting September 14, 1747, Plymouth considered the situation of a destitute Native woman who had died in town. As was record, “at sd Meeting then a Vote was called to know if the Town would allows Mrs. Rebeckah Wethrell anything for Her Cost & Charge Respecting Bathsha Sachamus an Indian woman who lay Sick and Dyed at Her House. Voted in Ye Negative.”¹¹

In 1751, the legislature awarded Stephen Fales some £8 through a petition showing that “Sarah Mamataug an Indian of Puncapaug came to his House & fell sick & died there, and the Petitioner was at the Expençe of her Sickness & Funeral.”¹²

In 1752, Mercy Amerquit a Native woman thought to be from Cape Cod, was cared for during a final illnesses at Dorchester, the town requesting reimbursement.¹³ In the same year, the selectmen of Grafton petitioned for

⁸ Support of Natives at Dedham: On Feb. 18, 1740 Capt. Fisher paid for an Indian’s funeral, Early Records of Dedham, 7: 41; on Nov. 15, 1742, Dr. Joseph Wright payment for Hannah Frigget, *ibid.*, 70; in December 1744, Benjamin Farirbanks was paid for “Care & Charge About an Indian Decased,” *ibid.*, 115; on Feb. 20, 1764, Samuel Doggett paid for coffin for Bette Comacher, *ibid.*, 315; payment March 13, 1765 to Samuel Bill for “Nursing Betty Comacher & boarding her,” *ibid.*, 330 while other payments for her are recorded in *ibid.*, 303, 306-307; payment June 13, 1764 to Dr. Ames “for Entertainment and Meddicens to Patience Pegan, and Indian Squaw & pappuse 20 Days,” *ibid.*, 307

⁹ Mass. Archives, 31:361-362

¹⁰ Mass. Archives, 31:562-563, for petition of Mary Plimpton, May 11, 1748, supported with affidavits of Dorchester selectmen

¹¹ Plymouth Town Records, III, 22

¹² Acts & Resolves, 14: 520-521, for petition Stephen Fales, payment authorized April 18, 1751; also, House Journal, 208, 217

¹³ Mass. Archives, 32:375, Dorchester petition of Jan. 25, 1753

£21.10s. as “Payment of the Charge of the Sickness and Burial” expenses of Sarah Burnee, an Indian resident in town.¹⁴ Elizabeth Pumham was a Punkapoag Indian who took ill in 1754, dying at the home of a Scipio Lock, “a black man,” who requested reimbursement for expenses in caring for her.¹⁵

At Plymouth in 1754, the Town was confronted with “Esther Cunnet an old Squaw who stands in need of support,” after adjournments of the Meeting, it was resolved that “ye Gentlemen Selectmen...are Desired to write to ye Gentlemen Commissioners in Boston, who have ye care of the Donations for ye Instruction & Support of ye Indians.”¹⁶

At Watertown, in 1756, care by the town was provided for an “Indian Woman that Sicken’d and Died.” She had been boarded with of Samuel Fisk, by authority of the selectmen a local physician “to Afford her Medecin’s & attendance as He shall think proper.” With her death, the town fathers agreed that “the Linnin that the corps are Laid out in be Allow’d for,” and ordered that “the two persons that Laid out the Corps have Each of them A Pair, of Gloves or the Value for that Service.” With unusual precision, the instructions of the Watertown selectmen ordained that:

Simon Hastings be Desired to make a Coffin & Dig the Grave. And that the Funeral be This Day towards Night—And that a Chair be procured to Carry the Corpose upon, And that the Bell be Tol’d when the Corpses are carrying to the Grave—Agreed that there be two Persons Desired to Assist in Carrying the Corpses to the Grave etc.: And that they have one Shilling & Six pence Each for their trouble—Agreed that the Reverend Mr. Storer be Desired to attend the Funeral and that He have a Pair of Gloves Given him—¹⁷

In 1757, Mary Moses, a poorer Indian woman, was cared for by the town of Roxbury; and, at Dorchester, an indigent Hannah Quason found in a “pitiable” condition, was provided shelter, a physician’s care and medicines during terminal illness. A physician’s bill was submitted to the General

¹⁴ Acts & Resolves, 15: 286, the General Court instructing the guardians of Indians at Grafton to reimburse the town for care provided Sarah Burnee

¹⁵ Mass. Archives, 32: 459, for petition Scipio Lock, from 1754.

¹⁶ Plymouth Town Records, III, 59

¹⁷ Helen Hadley, Office of the Mass. Secretary of State, Watertown Records Comprising the Fifth Book of Town Proceedings ...and the Sixth Book of Town Proceedings [shortened title], (Newton, Mass; Graphic Press, 1928) 183, 177-178

Court in 1758 for care extended to Sarah Pumham, a Native connected to the Punkapoag community.”¹⁸

In the 1760 sessions of the Plymouth County Court, Shubal Rose, an Indian of Rochester sought reimbursement for care provided Mercy Toto “an Indian woman, a poor person” who entered his house in the winter and “was taken sick.” Rose had applied fruitlessly to the Pembroke selectmen “in the Time of her Sickness,” who “refused to do anything ...by way of relief.” Caring for Mercy for three months and six days until she died, Rose was “put to great cost and troubling for nursing... and the Expence of her Funeral.”¹⁹ Rachel Pimsi of Dartmouth was cared for in 1762 by the town during an illness, selectmen petitioning for an allowance through suggested proposed sale of land of at Freeport to benefit Pimsi.²⁰

In 1765, Rachel Warren, a Needham widow was paid by the town for providing care to Deborah Jack, “an Indian Squaw which happened to fall Sick and Lame” in town. In the next year two other Needham residents were paid for assisting Deborah until she was removed to Bridgewater by the town constable, Needham ultimately reimbursed in 1767 by “one of the Guardians for ye Indians in Bridgewater” for assistance provided Deborah Jack alias Deborah Brand. Additionally, in 1766, Needham also allowed 6s.8d. for the coffin and funeral expenses of an Indian “child” that died in town.²¹

Also, in 1765, Hannah Cowitt was an indigent Indian woman supported by Duxbury who apparently had worked for families in Plymouth and Kingston but “not credited as an inhabitant of any town” so the province was requested to meet expenses for her care.

¹⁸ Mass. Archives, 33:319-320, petition from Roxbury, Jan., 14, 1765 describing services, affidavits and physician’s bills for Mary Moses. Ibid., 33:23-24 for care of Hannah Quason at Dorchester, petition by Samuel How and town selectmen, in November 1757. Ibid., 33:39, petition of Dr. Gardner for attending Sarah Pumham, Apr. 22, 1758

¹⁹ Plymouth Court, General Sessions of the Peace, 1748-1781, 3:139, for petition of Subal Rose, Court ordering the Pembroke selectmen appear and show cause why he was not yet paid. In later records dealing with an assault on his wife Susanna, she is “wife of Shubal Rose...Hanover, Indianman,” ibid., 3:243. For more information on the 1772 assault, See below {cross-refernce}

²⁰ Mass. Archives, 33:195-196, for Dartmouth petition, Feb. 16-17, 1762

²¹ George Kuhn Clarke, History of Needham, Massachusetts 1711-1911 (privately printe) 558-559

The physician Nathaniel Houghton, submitted bills in 1767 to the General Court for care he provided Elizabeth Pumham, from Punkapoag, and her young son Thomas Pumham. In 1768, the town of Springfield requested payment for the terminal illness of Patience, an Indian pauper. Also, in 1768, Needham physician William Deming, applied to the General Court to be paid for “Attendance on William Frazier, an Indian, in his last Sickness” and assistance provided “his Widow and Children.”²²

In 1770, Milton resident Thomas Vose petitioned the General Court for reimbursement in the care and support of an indigent Indian named Lydia. In 1773, Northampton’s selectmen petitioned the General Court for reimbursement in supporting Abigail Meason, a poor Indian, supposedly from Farmington in Connecticut. Hingham’s selectmen, in 1774, sought reimbursement for Patience, an indigent Indian woman, assisted by the town.²³

Also, in 1774, Milton resident Nathan Badcock applied for reimbursement for care provided Betty Pompey, an indigent Indian. In July 1776, Needham resident Michael Bacon sought payment from the General Court for assistance provided “one Alexander Quapish a Poor Indian ...taken Sick in the Army” near Cambridge, discharged to Bacon’s house.” Bacon cared for Quapish from November 1775 through March 1776 when the Indian died, claiming in his petition he was “at Great Trouble & Charge in Boarding Nursing, and Burying said Indian.”²⁴

Where whites are often easily paid for services to Natives, when the same assistance was performed by Indians in caring for members of their community, payment was sometimes difficult and long overdue when eventually forthcoming. For example, in 1754 Punkapoag Native Nelson Fenney of Middleborough supported another Punkapoag, a “young Indian” named Matthias George “during illness,” the guardians of the Tribe refusing to reimburse him. On the same day, Fenney’s petition was presented an order

²² For Cowitt, Mass. Archives, 33:324-325, for petition Feb. 6, 1765 by Benjamin Loring {re-check petitioner} requesting the province meet expenses, mentioning other towns as previous place of residence .For Elizabeth Pumham, *ibid.*,33:401-406. For Patience, *ibid.*, 464-467, petition filed Nov. 14, 1768. For, Frazier, House Journal

²³ *Ibid.*,33:496-497, petition of July 1770. For Abigail, *ibid.*,569-572. For Patience from Hingham, *ibid.*,:600-601, Hingham’s petition filed Jan. 1, 1774

²⁴ Mass. Archives, 33:627-628, for petition Nathan Badcock, approved by the Milton selectmen, June 2, 1774. Bacon received a total of £6, 8s, including a charge of 8 s. for a coffin and 3s. for digging a grave, see Mass. Archives, 214:57, 57a

issued to a guardian to pay the Native and his family. Additional orders that Nelson Fenney be reimbursed for caring for a member of his community were issued by the General Court on December 27, 1754 and, again, on June 6, 1755. As late as April of 1756, Fenney's bill was still not paid by the guardians, the Court "praying" for its immediate liquidation but on December 8, 1757 there be would another and final order to pay Fenney's bill. For assistance to another member of the Indian community, Nelson Fenney had to wait years for compensation.²⁵

Additionally, poorer or indigent Indians were also often found dead in circumstances requiring inquests. For example, in 1736, an inquest was ordered on the body of "an Indian Child of John Quasons," found dead at Pembroke. In 1740, an inquest was required on the body of "Mary, an Indian Squaw found dead at Marshfield," and, again, in 1741, in the death of Jeremiah Attequin at Plymouth. In the 1740s, the Plymouth County coroners performed other inquests on Patience Moses, "an Inden Squaw found Dead on the Sea shore," and Patience Sepit, an "Indian girl...found dead" at Middleborough. In September 1751, a coroner was paid for an inquest into the death of Zaccheus Wicket, "an Indian man...found dead" in Bridgewater. Additionally, the Plymouth Court ordered inquests when: Betty David, wife of Stephen David, Indians, in 1752 "was supposed of being Murdered;" Sarah Robbins, "an Indianwoman" was found dead in 1755; Danis Sachemus, "an Indian woman" was found dead in Plymouth; Betty Peters, "Indian...dead in the Road;"; and, also, Lydia Peage, in 1762, "found dead."²⁶

²⁵ Mass. Archives, 32;499-500, petition of Nov. 15, 1754 to the General Court by Nelson Fenney; *ibid.*, order Nov. 15, 1754 that Samuel Miller, Ponkapoag guardian make payment. *Ibid.*,:630-631, orders from the General Court for Fenney's payments Dec. 12, 1754 and June 6, 1755. *Ibid.*, 32: 706-707a, for order Apr. 17, 1756 that Fenney be paid; and, *ibid.*, 33:25-25a for repeat order from Dec. 8, 1757

²⁶ Plymouth Court, General Sessions of the Peace 1719-1749, 2: 205, 211. *Ibid.*, 3: 6, :23, order September 1751. *Ibid.*, 3:40, 81, 99; 142, 336