

House of Industry fonds

City of Toronto Archives

Volume 99, Number 2, Fall 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065743ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065743ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

City of Toronto Archives (2007). House of Industry fonds. *Ontario History*, 99(2), 252–254. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065743ar>

House of Industry fonds

City of Toronto Archives, fonds 1035

City of Toronto Archives

255 Spadina Road, Toronto,
Ontario M5R 2V3

Public Information (416) 397-5000

Research Hall (416) 397-0778

<<http://www.toronto.ca/archives/>>

The Archives collects documents created by the City of Toronto municipal government and by its predecessor municipalities as well as non-government records that complement the government records and help create a more complete view of Toronto's history.

*House of Industry
residents crushing
rocks. Series 810,
File 2.*

The House of Industry fonds at the City of Toronto Archives provides access to a rarely glimpsed facet of early Toronto history; the sub-set of mid-nineteenth century society that included impoverished immigrants, unemployed men, aged and disabled citizens without family, abandoned women and orphans in an era before tax-funded safety nets. The fonds in particular illuminates the situation of Toronto's destitute poor and their relationship with the city's prosperous citizens. The registers, indexes, annual reports, Board minutes and correspondence books generated in the early years of the House's activities document the tension inherent in the intersection between the pious and humane

impulse to relieve the suffering of the disadvantaged and an aversion to fostering a dependant, idle class. A public meeting in December 1836 called by Archdeacon Strachan resulted in the formation of a committee chaired by Mayor George Gurnett, to devise means of providing temporary relief to the poor, especially during the winter months. A number of prominent citizens signed onto the committee including Rev. Egerton Ryerson, publisher Henry Rowsell, and politician Robert Baldwin. The House of Industry began and remained interdenominational, collaborating with charities linked to religious institutions and carefully monitoring recipients to avoid duplication of relief.

The House of Industry was

established on Richmond Street in 1837, funded in part by a gift from the city of a lot of land and a grant of £30. The Chairman's report for that year notes that "while it is desirable to avoid the formation of large Alms-Houses, as having a tendency to encourage idleness...it is obvious that there must be in all communities a class of aged and helpless poor, and of orphan children, who must be maintained at the public expense." A larger building on Shuter Street was obtained in 1842, but these accommodations were soon inadequate and in 1848 the present building was erected on Elm Street. Building files and architectural blueprints in the fonds document the physical changes to the building as it evolved and

expanded.

The administrative structure that lasted through its history was immediately put in place: a Superintendent and his wife, the Matron, supervised the House, consisting of a residence for women, children, the aged and disabled, and a 'casual ward' available for employable men down on their luck. The 'casuals' were often required to work in order to qualify for food and lodging; the fonds includes a photograph of a group of men breaking rocks on the grounds of the House of Industry (Illustration 1). 'Out of door' aid was available to families living independently but in dire circumstances. Printed rosters indicate that volunteer ward visitors, each responsible for a few street blocks, determined the needs of the 'out of door poor'. Visitors reported to the Superintendent who presented each case at bi-weekly meetings and a decision was made whether or not to mete out coal and food supplies. Registers were maintained to record the dispersal of relief and provided information on nationality, religious denomination, marital status and type of aid. In some cases a 'Remarks' column was used to record a wide range of pithy comments including race, physical disability, mental state, death date, departure date, etc. Needless to say, depraved morals and the use of alcohol would negate any sort of want, although cases were noted when compassion for children superseded a parent's unworthiness. As many as 110

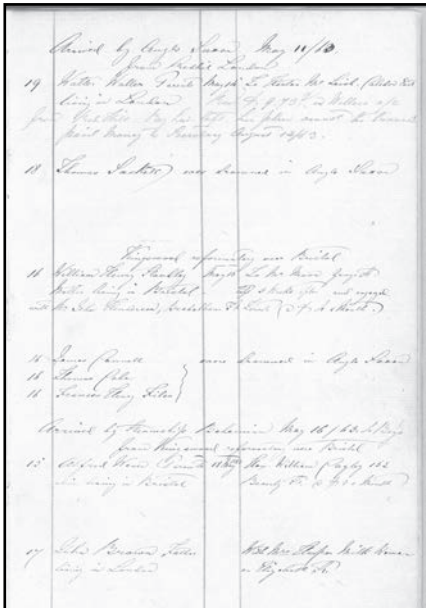
ward visitors reported to the House until 1921, when four paid visitors were employed. Medical care was provided in the early years by a roster of local physicians, later by paid medical staff. A letter from the Superintendent on 31 July 1854 states with some anxiety that "no one is attending to the young man whose foot was amputated a short time ago. Dr. Russell was attending in place of Dr. Bethune but has not been at the House since Friday last...And the young man is getting so much pain in the foot that his crying begins to alarm me. Would you have the goodness to come and see what is the matter." Dr. Norman Bethune, a recent graduate of the Royal College of Surgeons in London, was active at the House of Industry for a number of years and was the grandfather of Dr. Henry Norman Bethune, renowned for his medical work in China in the 1930's.

A service to the community supplied by the House of Industry was to function as broker for citizens requiring domestic servants, farm hands, and apprentices for shops and trades. Impoverished parents were obliged to indenture children as early as two years of age if they were unable to provide for them and the House had a formal system for sending children out to employ, with legal documents ensuring that employers would provide clothing and schooling, and set aside a wage payable when the child was 18. The Superintendent's correspondence book for 1854 to 1878, in which

outgoing letters were copied, is in its early years primarily concerned with ensuring that both parties to these agreements were doing their part. The letters record inquiries from anxious mothers, reports of run-away apprentices, complaints regarding non-payment of wages due, and reports of mistreatment by employers. A letter from May 10, 1854 states that

"The little girl Elizabeth Hines apprenticed to you in July 1853 returned to this Institution in a very desolate state, almost naked and covered with dirt. She complains of ill usage. The committee for the week commencing 7th May, ordered the Superintendent to write you and ascertain the cause of her leaving your House; and if it was your intention to take her back again."

A letter dated 23 May 1854, indicates that she was reunited with her employer. Another letter dated 10 June 1860 responds to a complaint from Mr. Elliot that the Board "is sorry that you should have had so much trouble with Anne, but they hope that after a while when she gets sent to school, and as she grows older, she will have more sense and mend her ways, and most likely will then repay you by being grateful for the trouble you took in her behalf." In 1856 the Board firmly chastised Mr. Frizzle of Whitby who presented himself as "engaged in the quiet and peaceable occupation of a Butcher." A local minister learned that the butcher was making use of two youngsters



Register of boys who arrived in the Toronto House of Industry from England, 1858-1864. Series 802, File 13.

from the House to help with his business selling liquor; the Board demanded the return of the children in his charge.

During the years 1858 to 1864, the House of Industry acted as a way station for young men from similar Houses in the British Isles on their way to farmers and merchants in Toronto and the surrounding area. A separate register was kept for these home children, aged 13 to 20; giving their religion, city of origin, whether their parents were alive or dead, the ship they sailed on, and the names and addresses of the parties who engaged them. A separate index by name was kept for some years. The register notes that, of the six young men bound for Canada aboard the steamship *Anglo Saxon* in 1863, four drowned (Illustration 2). The *Anglo Saxon* went down off the coast of Newfoundland on 27 April 1863, with the loss of 237 lives. Walter Waller of London,

aged 19, and William Henry Standley from Bistol, 16, survived and were sent off to Calledon East and Breadalbane, respectively. One can only wonder at the drama of these young men's lives: raised in an institution, uprooted from a familiar if harsh environment, ship-wrecked and indentured to strangers.

A register from 1863 records the names and wages of women who acted as wet nurses for orphaned and abandoned babies. Attached to the front of this register is a scrap of paper with the following message: "this dear baby it is want that makes me to part with him. I tried everything that I could before I done this do as well as you can with him".

Over the years of its existence the House altered its activities in response to specific events. After the formation of the Children's Aid Society in 1846, finding homes for orphaned children ceased to be a priority. A file from 1883 contains the report of a special committee set up with extra funding from the City to distribute blankets to new immigrants. The committee gave away 209 pairs of blankets, 29 comforters and 29 bedsteads to families who were predominantly Irish, but also English and Icelandic. A chart organized by street address gives the family name and records the items given out. Samuel Alcorn, Chairman of the Special Committee, reported that "Much difficulty

was experienced in forming a judgment as to giving from the untruthful character of a certain class..." but apparently "only one pair of blankets found its way to the pawnbroker". The annual reports for 1915 to 1918 show that the House concentrated its aid on approximately 24,000 families of returned soldiers. As government agencies assumed more responsibility for social programs the core functions of the House also changed. The Annual Report for 1947 gives 'casual relief' statistics for the last time and the House of Industry became Laughlen Lodge, exclusively a Home for the Elderly.

As the years passed and increasing numbers of needy Torontonians sought aid, reports produced by the House of Industry became less anecdotal. Subjective opinions in paragraph form changed to check marks and numbers on printed forms as record-keeping evolved to maintain the House efficiently. Later records show a softening of tone, as a sun-room, for instance, was built to provide a pleasant space for inmates. In its entirety, the House of Industry funds bears testimony to the circumstances of a largely mute segment of early Toronto society; heard through the filter of 19th century middle class mores there are compelling stories here of the social forces at work on both the vulnerable and those who tried to save them.