

RURAL POOR RELIEF IN COLONIAL SOUTH CAROLINA*

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ABSTRACT. *This article explores the rural poor relief system of colonial South Carolina. It finds that poor relief was substantially more generous and more readily available in rural areas of South Carolina than elsewhere in British North America, or indeed in the entire Anglophone world. It suggests that this was because elite vestrymen had deep-seated concerns about the position of the white poor in a society that was dominated by African slavery. Generous relief of adult paupers was therefore a public demonstration of the privileges of race to which all whites were entitled. Elites in rural South Carolina also made considerable efforts to provide a free education for pauper children that would inculcate industry and usefulness among those who might become future public burdens. The serious attention paid to the situation of the white poor in colonial South Carolina was therefore part of an effort to ensure the unity of white society by overcoming the divisions of class.*

On 22 April 1773 the vestrymen of Prince Frederick's parish, South Carolina, received an application from Elizabeth Boshere 'for some relief from the parish in her present situation'. After investigating her case, the vestry 'agreed that she go to Mrs McDowell in order to cure her & that some suitable cloath be bought by the Wardens for her, also her mother to be assisted in her present indisposition'. While the vestry minutes did not specify Boshere's medical condition the vestrymen clearly thought it merited treatment and, with a view to her prospects once cured, the vestry also provided her with cloth and thread, presumably so that she could earn a living as a seamstress. In total the vestry spent £33 10s 3d on the relief of Elizabeth Boshere, but evidently to no avail as in April 1774 they paid £10 to William Pawlings to bury her.¹ Boshere was just one of hundreds of paupers assisted by South Carolina's rural Anglican vestries before the American

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¹ Elizabeth W. A. Pringle, *The register book for the parish Prince Frederick Winyaw* (Baltimore, 1916), pp. 209, 212. All monetary values quoted in the text are in local South Carolina currency unless stated otherwise. The exchange rate between local South Carolina currency and the pound sterling stabilized in the 1720s at £7 currency to £1 sterling, and remained roughly the same for the rest of the colonial period. John J. McCusker, *Money and exchange in Europe and America, 1600–1775* (Chapel Hill, 1978), pp. 220, 222–4; Klaus G. Loewald, Beverly Staricka, and Paul S. Taylor, eds., 'Johann Martin Bolzium answers a questionnaire on Carolina and Georgia, Part 2', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 15 (1958), p. 243.

Revolution and the carefully tailored approach to her situation taken by the vestry of Prince Frederick's parish was typical of many other South Carolina vestries.

This article is an examination of the welfare policies adopted by the Anglican vestries of colonial South Carolina. Although broadly based on the English poor laws South Carolina's public relief system differed significantly in terms of its operation and its generosity from that of the mother country, and from those of other North American colonies. The purpose of this article is to explain the reasons behind those differences and to explore how far welfare policy in rural colonial South Carolina was shaped by vestrymen's concerns about the white poor in a society deeply divided by race and class.

I

The rice planters of colonial South Carolina constituted the wealthiest elite in British North America in the mid-eighteenth century and the profits generated by the labour of many thousands of enslaved Africans funded a genteel lifestyle of country mansions and lavishly furnished townhouses in Charles-Town, the colonial capital.² Those fortunate enough to enjoy this wealth also had a strong ethos of public service, dominating the political and administrative infrastructure of the colony through the colonial assembly and the parish vestries. Both Robert Weir and Rebecca Starr have articulated how this political elite united around a common ethos, one that enabled them to maintain their grip on power while also being flexible enough to deflect challenges such as that posed by the Regulator movement in the backcountry.³ While the colonial assembly was far more politically significant than the parish vestries, those elected as churchwardens and as vestrymen in South Carolina played a far greater role in local government than their counterparts did in other colonies. Most other southern colonies had alternative tiers of local government, such as the county court, but South Carolina and Georgia left the management of nearly all local affairs exclusively to Anglican vestries. As the only local tax-raising body the vestry exerted a vast influence over local affairs.⁴ Naturally vestries spent considerable time obtaining the regular services of a minister and maintaining the church, parsonage, and glebe lands, but rural vestries in South Carolina also had exclusive responsibility for the poor

² Russell R. Menard, 'Slavery, economic growth and revolutionary ideology in the South Carolina lowcountry', in Ronald Hoffman, John J. McCusker, Russell R. Menard, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *The economy of early America* (Charlottesville, 1988), pp. 247–8; Peter A. Coclanis, *The shadow of a dream: economic life and death in the South Carolina lowcountry, 1760–1920* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 90–1. Throughout 'Charles-Town' is used in preference to the post-revolutionary term 'Charleston'.

³ Robert M. Weir, "'The harmony we were famous for': an interpretation of pre-revolutionary South Carolina politics', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 26 (1969), pp. 473–501; Rebecca Starr, *A school for politics: commercial lobbying and political culture in early South Carolina* (Baltimore, 1998), pp. 109–11.

⁴ Richard Waterhouse, 'The responsible gentry of colonial South Carolina: a study in local government, 1670–1770', in Bruce C. Daniels, ed., *Town and county: essays on the structure of local government in the American colonies* (Middletown, CT, 1978), pp. 166–74; S. Charles Bolton, *Southern Anglicanism: the Church of England in colonial South Carolina* (Westport, CT, 1982), pp. 140–1.

in their own parishes granted to them under the 1712 poor law.⁵ By contrast, parish vestries in Virginia and North Carolina administered poor relief, but only county courts had the power to indenture poor and orphan children.⁶ In Maryland the county courts dispensed nearly all poor relief, with Anglican vestries reduced to administering legacies left for the poor.⁷ South Carolina's vestries were empowered to assess the property of the inhabitants of the parish in order to fund public poor relief but close relatives of the poor were expected to care for them if possible, and orphan children were bound out as apprentices until they reached their majority rather than becoming a public burden. In order to be eligible for poor relief, applicants needed to have been settled in the parish for a period of three months with transients being returned to their home parish for support.⁸

Since almost all that has been written hitherto about poverty in colonial South Carolina has concentrated on Charles-Town, the work of rural vestries in providing relief to the white poor remains comparatively obscure. The focus on Charles-Town is understandable since it was the largest city in the colonial south, an important port, and the seat of the provincial government. Like many other port cities of the eighteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic it had a heterogeneous population of rich, poor, black, white, free, and enslaved. The poor white population, mainly consisting of the sick, the aged, and the orphaned, was periodically swollen by immigrants and transients, and the city bore the brunt of the effects of war and disease. The vestry of St Philip's church in Charles-Town originally dispensed just outdoor relief to those it deemed worthy of help, but such was the concentration of paupers in the city that in 1738 the vestry chose the route of institutionalization and opened a poorhouse for the reception of 'rogues, vagabonds and other lewd, idle and disorderly persons' as well as parish paupers.⁹ Several historians have

⁵ 'An act for the better relief of the poor of this province', passed 12 Dec. 1712; Nicholas Trott, *The laws of the province of South Carolina* (2 vols., Charles-Town, 1736), I, pp. 270–5.

⁶ William H. Siler, 'The Anglican parish vestry in colonial Virginia', *Journal of Southern History*, 22 (1956), p. 333; John K. Nelson, *A blessed company: parishes, parsons & parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690–1776* (Chapel Hill, 2001), pp. 74–5; Elna C. Green, *This business of relief: confronting poverty in a southern city, 1740–1940* (Athens, GA, 2003), pp. 9–20; Alan D. Watson, 'Orphanage in colonial North Carolina: Edgecombe County as a case study', *North Carolina Historical Review*, 52 (1975), p. 106.

⁷ Zachary Ryan Calo, 'From poor relief to the poorhouse: the response to poverty in Prince George's County, Maryland, 1710–1770', *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 93 (1998), p. 393; Gerald E. Hartdagan, 'The Anglican vestry in colonial Maryland: a study in corporate responsibility', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 40 (1971), p. 471; Lois Green Carr, 'The foundations of social order: local government in colonial Maryland', in Daniels, ed., *Town and county*, pp. 72–110.

⁸ South Carolina was the only southern colony to pass its own comprehensive poor law instead of adopting a piecemeal approach. Howard Mackey, 'The operation of the English old poor law in colonial Virginia', *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 73 (1965), pp. 32–3; Alan D. Watson, 'Public poor relief in colonial North Carolina', *North Carolina Historical Review*, 54 (1977), pp. 347–66.

⁹ 'An act for the better relief and employment of the poor of the parish of St Philip's Charles Town', passed 29 May 1736, *Acts passed by the general assembly of South Carolina* (Charles-Town, 1736), pp. 32–9. Charles-Town was not the first American city to open a poorhouse. Boston had opened one as early as 1685. Philadelphia had followed suit in 1732 and New York in 1736. Baltimore opened its almshouse in 1773. Billy G. Smith, 'Poverty and economic marginality in eighteenth-century America', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 132 (1988), pp. 89, 94; Gary B. Nash, 'Poverty

used the rich records of St Philip's vestry and drawn general conclusions about the nature of poor relief in the city: that the cost of relief was increasing rapidly, especially in the 1760s and 1770s, and that although vestrymen had certain ideas as to who was worthy of charity, relatively few applicants were turned away.¹⁰

Our knowledge of public poor relief elsewhere in colonial South Carolina is far less comprehensive. The problem of pauper concentration faced by Charleston was not repeated in rural areas, and this has tempted some historians to be dismissive of the assistance provided by rural vestries.¹¹ Contemporaries were often no better. Charles Woodmason maintained in 1766 that 'there is not a beggar in the province – every parish maintains its own poor – but there are few, or none, out of Charlestown', while Alexander Hewatt believed that 'as every person by diligence and application may earn a comfortable livelihood, there are few poor people in the province, except the idle or unfortunate'.¹² This was simply not the case, and by utilizing the vestry minutes from eight rural parishes in colonial South Carolina a detailed picture of the relief available to rural whites emerges.¹³ Moreover, by examining the language used by applicants and

and poor relief in pre-revolutionary Philadelphia', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 23 (1976), p. 4; Douglas G. Carrol, Jr and Blanche D. Coll, 'The Baltimore almshouse, an early history', *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 66 (1971), p. 138.

¹⁰ Michael Dane Byrd, "'Ye have the poor always with you": attitudes toward relief of the poor in colonial Charles Town' (Master of Social Work thesis, South Carolina, 1973); Walter J. Fraser, 'The city elite, "disorder" and the poor children of pre-revolutionary Charleston', *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 84 (1983), pp. 167–79; Walter J. Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!* (Columbia, 1989), pp. 102–3; Barbara L. Bellows, *Benevolence among slaveholders: assisting the poor in Charleston, 1670–1860* (Baton Rouge, 1993), pp. 1–20. Minutes of the vestry of St Philip's church between 1732 and 1775 are available in the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia (SCDAH).

¹¹ Richard Waterhouse, *A new world gentry: the making of a merchant and planter class in South Carolina, 1670–1770* (New York, 1989), p. 71; Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: a history* (Columbia, 1998), p. 125; Weir, "'The harmony we were famous for'", p. 480. For previous studies of poor relief in colonial America see John K. Alexander, *Render them submissive: responses to poverty in Philadelphia, 1760–1800* (Amherst, 1980); Simon P. Newman, *Embodied history: the lives of the poor in early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2003); Nash, 'Poverty and poor relief in pre-revolutionary Philadelphia'; idem, 'Urban wealth and poverty in pre-revolutionary America', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 6 (1976), pp. 564–5; Billy G. Smith, 'The material lives of laboring Philadelphians, 1750–1800', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 38 (1981), 163–202; Raymond A. Mohl, 'Poverty in early America, a reappraisal: the case of eighteenth-century New York City', *New York History*, 50 (1969), pp. 5–27; idem, *Poverty in New York, 1783–1925* (New York, 1971); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, 'Sheep in the parlour, wheels on the common: pastoralism and poverty in eighteenth-century Boston', in Carla Gardina Pestana and Sharon V. Salinger, eds., *Inequality in early America* (Hanover and London, 1999), pp. 182–200; Billy G. Smith, ed., *Down and out in early America* (University Park, 2004).

¹² Charles Woodmason as cited in Richard J. Hooker, ed., *The Carolina backcountry on the eve of the Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1953), p. 72; Alexander Hewatt, *An historical account of the rise & progress of the colonies of South Carolina and Georgia* (London, 1779), II, p. 294.

¹³ The eight parishes are St Helena's, St John's Colleton, and Christ Church, which are coastal parishes; St John's Berkeley, Prince Frederick Winyaw, St Stephen's, St Matthew's, and St David's, which are interior parishes (the last two were backcountry parishes in the colonial era). Four sets of vestry minutes have been published. A. S. Salley, Jr, ed., *Minutes of the vestry of St. Helena's parish, South Carolina 1726–1812* (2nd edn, Columbia, 1958); Pringle, *The register book for the parish Prince Frederick Winyaw*; Anne Allston Porcher, ed., 'Minutes of the vestry of St. Stephen's parish, South Carolina,

vestrymen, conclusions can be drawn as to the reasons why relief was made available at a particular level to poor rural whites.

II

Between 1712 and 1776, about 400 individuals were assisted by the eight rural South Carolina parishes with surviving vestry records. By comparison, the vestry of St Philip's in Charles-Town assisted some 880 individuals between 1751 and 1774.¹⁴ Yet it must be emphasized that bald statistics such as these have only limited usefulness. Some parishes were lax in recording the number of people receiving relief, even though they were evidently levying a poor tax on parishioners to support somebody. Christchurch parish, for example, collected a poor tax of £100 in 1740 to assist 'several of the poor inhabitants of this parish' but failed to name specific individuals.¹⁵ There is also no data from thirteen of South Carolina's parishes. The individuals identified in the extant records thus represent a mere fraction of the actual number of people who received assistance in rural South Carolina. The true total was probably somewhere between 1,000 and 1,500 people receiving assistance in rural areas, with about the same number, or slightly more, assisted in Charles-Town.¹⁶ This puts the picture of poverty and charity in

1754–1873', *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 45 (1944), pp. 65–70, 157–71, 217–21; 46 (1945), pp. 40–8, 93–102; Brent H. Holcomb, *Saint David's parish, South Carolina: minutes of the vestry, 1768–1832, parish register, 1819–1924* (Easley, 1979). The typescript vestry minutes of St Matthew's parish, St John's parish, Colleton, and Christ Church parish are available in the South Caroliniana Library of the University of South Carolina (SCL). Microfilm copies of the minutes of St John's Berkeley parish are available in the SCDAH. All subsequent references to vestry minutes refer to these originals. No colonial vestry minutes survive from the parishes of St Luke, Prince William, St Peter, St Bartholomew, St Paul, St Andrew, St George, St James Goose Creek, St Thomas and St Denis, St James Santee, Prince George Winyaw, and All Saints. Moreover, no vestry records survive from any Anglican church in colonial Georgia, and only two sets remain from colonial North Carolina namely St Paul's, Chowan County, and St John's, Carteret County, both of which are coastal parishes. Alan D. Watson, 'The Anglican parish in royal North Carolina, 1729–1775', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 48 (1979), pp. 303–19. The vestry minutes of St Paul's parish between 1701 and 1741 have been published in Robert J. Cain, ed., *The colonial records of North Carolina, 2nd ser., volume x: the Church of England in North Carolina. Documents, 1699–1741* (Raleigh, 1999), pp. 431–94. By contrast, the bibliography of Joan R. Gunderson's, *The Anglican ministry in Virginia, 1736–1766: a study of a social class* (New York and London, 1989), pp. 305–8, lists extant vestry minutes from thirty-eight colonial Virginia parishes.

¹⁴ Fraser, 'The city elite', p. 175. Michael Byrd argues that St Philip's in Charles-Town most likely assisted many more than those listed in the vestry minutes. Byrd, "'Ye have the poor always with you'", p. 10. These figures include dependent children who received assistance along with a parent.

¹⁵ Christ Church vestry minutes (hereafter VM), 8 Aug. 1740. For similar cases of vestries recording the total amounts spent on poor relief, without ever noting the individuals who received help see Prince Frederick's VM, 20 May 1732; St John's Colleton VM, 3 May 1748; and St Stephen's VM, 19 Apr. 1756. The Parochial Register of the Parishes of St Thomas and St Denis (1693–1794) listed one set of accounts on 26 Mar. 1714 including a sum of £1 16s 5d. 'for the use of the poor' (Works Progress Administration typescript, SCL).

¹⁶ This figure is based on the fact that if vestry minutes had survived from all rural parishes from 1712 (passage of the poor law), or the date of foundation if later, until 1776, there would have been 919 years of minutes. Extant minutes total just 256 years, or 27.85 per cent of the possible total. If the

colonial South Carolina into sharper focus. The concentration of paupers in Charles-Town naturally attracted attention, and placed a great financial burden on just one parish, but poverty was clearly not just confined to the city, and collectively rural vestries probably did just as much as St Philip's to assist the poor.

The available evidence from St Philip's suggests that poverty was a growing problem in Charles-Town during the late colonial era since the amount spent on, and the numbers receiving, poor relief increased rapidly.¹⁷ In an attempt to deter paupers from coming to Charles-Town, and thus ease the financial burden on city residents, in 1768 the provincial legislature increased the period of residency required to receive poor relief from three months to a year. While this measure might have enabled the vestry of St Philip's to deny help to some, as it did to a group of transient Irish men in 1770 and no doubt to others who do not appear in the records, it did nothing to reduce the poor tax burden.¹⁸ Annual poor relief expenditure in Charles-Town continued to rise quickly, from £5,721 in 1765 to more than £16,500 in 1775, and the provincial grand jury found little reason to cease its complaints about 'the ineffectual provision made by law, to prevent the poor, and the idle, from all parts of this, and many neighbouring provinces, being brought to, and centering in Charles-Town'.¹⁹

The accusation that rural parishes reduced their poor relief bills by sending paupers to Charles-Town is not supported by the surviving vestry minutes of rural parishes. There are few demands from the vestry of St Philip's requesting support for rural paupers who had recently relocated to Charles-Town.²⁰ Despite the law, which was considerably more relaxed than English settlement laws anyway, the residency requirements for poor relief were not strictly observed: paupers were

number receiving poor relief was hypothetically constant throughout the colony, the 401 individuals identified as receiving relief would compose 27.85 per cent of the whole, or 1,440 people. It should be noted that the minutes of St Philip's only survive from 1732, therefore the total number helped by that vestry is also unknown.

¹⁷ A contemporary examination of the accounts of St Philip's revealed that poor relief expenditure had increased from £1,200 in 1747 to £6,515 in 1766. J. H. Easterby, 'Public poor relief in colonial Charleston', *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 42 (1941), p. 85. See also St Philip's VM, 15 Dec. 1766.

¹⁸ 'An act ... for establishing further regulations respecting the poor', passed 12 Apr. 1768, Sec. v: *Acts passed by the general assembly of South Carolina* (Charles-Town, 1768), p. 39. The increase in the number of poor people was also noted in Savannah. See the petition of the vestry of Christchurch parish to the commons house of assembly, 18 Feb. 1767, in Allen D. Candler, ed., *The colonial records of the state of Georgia* (39 vols., New York, 1970), xiv, p. 439. St Philip's VM, 23 Apr. 1770.

¹⁹ Byrd, "'Ye have the poor always with you'", p. 40; *South Carolina Gazette*, 25 Jan. 1770. Such presentations were nothing new, a very similar one can be found in the *South Carolina Gazette*, 23–30 Mar. 1734.

²⁰ There are only two examples of such requests in the minutes. St Helena's paid £67 13s 4d to the vestry of St Philip's for the care of Ann Primrose, and the vestry of St John's Colleton reimbursed £33 that St Philip's had spent on the care of Samuel Palmerin. St Helena's VM, 28 Oct. 1757; St John's Colleton VM, 25 Sept. 1758. See also the request for reimbursement of £10 given to a French woman from St Thomas and St Denis parish. St Philip's VM, 11 Jan. 1774.

likely to be relieved regardless of the locality of their home parish. The vestry of St Philip's dealt with a number of transients from elsewhere in South Carolina, but sent only a minority of them back to their home parishes. One such pauper was Lydia Jones who was ordered back to St Helena's parish in 1737, though the vestry agreed that she 'shall be taken care of till her sores are well'. The rector of St Helena's, Lewis Jones, wrote personally to his counterpart, Alexander Garden, to confirm that St Helena's parish would accept her back with no complaint, and would pay the expenses of her care, plus £4 in interest to St Philip's.²¹ The extant evidence suggests that the relaxed attitude of the vestrymen of St Philip's towards the settlement laws was mirrored by their rural equivalents. Only on two occasions did rural vestries try to remove a pauper back to their home parish: St David's vestry ordered 'a poor woman' at Benjamin James's house to be returned 'to the parish from whence she came' and St Helena's parish tried, unsuccessfully, to return George Buncle to neighbouring Prince William's parish before he died.²² The attitudes of South Carolinian vestries towards legal settlement stands in marked contrast to their counterparts in England and in New England, where authorities regularly denied relief to those without a legal settlement and went to great lengths to exclude those who might become parish paupers. Historians have interpreted the exclusion of strangers as vital to community formation since it fostered a sense of solidarity amongst those who did have a legal settlement.²³ In an immigrant society like colonial South Carolina many would not have had a legal settlement in the English sense of being born in the parish. Moreover, South Carolina's vestries perhaps did not enforce the settlement laws at the time for fear of inhibiting white immigration to the colony. In fact it was government policy in South

²¹ St Philip's VM, 8 Aug. 1737, 29 May 1738. St Philip's Churchwarden's Account Book 1725–52, 24 Nov. 1738 (SCDAH). Once back in St Helena's parish Jones received poor relief for a further two years. St Helena's VM, 20 Aug. 1739; Easter Monday, 1740. Similarly, William Davison and his wife were ordered to return to Prince Frederick's parish in 1761, with the vestry of St Philip's providing them with £20 to speed their return. St Philip's VM, 17 Apr. 1761. It is possible that this William Davison is the same man who later obtained relief for his wife from St David's parish, which was carved out of neighbouring Prince Frederick's parish in 1768. St David's VM, 4 July 1770. For other examples of paupers from rural parishes being cared for see St Philip's VM, 18 Feb. 1740, 12 Jan. and 2 Feb. 1748, 7 Apr. 1756, 20 Dec. 1762, 30 Dec. 1771.

²² St David's VM, 3 May 1773, St Helena's VM, 3 Aug. 1747, 16 Feb. 1748, 11 Apr. 1748, 22 June 1748, 27 June 1751.

²³ See Paul Slack, *The English poor law, 1531–1782* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 28–30; Norma Landau, 'The regulation of immigration, economic structures and definitions of the poor in eighteenth-century', *Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), pp. 541–71; Ruth Wallis Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans: living on the margin in early New England* (Philadelphia, 2001), pp. 2–22; idem, "'Who died an expence to this town": poor relief in eighteenth-century Rhode Island', in Smith, ed., *Down and out in early America*, pp. 135–62; Douglas Lamar Jones, 'The strolling poor: transiency in eighteenth-century Massachusetts', *Journal of Social History*, 8 (1975), pp. 28–54; Steve Hindle, 'Exclusion crises: poverty, migration and parochial responsibility in English rural communities, c. 1560–1660', *Rural History*, 7 (1996), pp. 126–7, 138–9; idem, 'Power, poor relief, and social relations in Holland Fen, c. 1600–1800', *Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), pp. 87–94. Even vestries in Virginia were more concerned about residency laws than their counterparts in South Carolina. Green, *This business of relief*, pp. 11–12.

Carolina to encourage white settlement to offset the colony's growing black majority.²⁴

The available data from rural parishes, while far from complete, does however tend to confirm the impression from Charles-Town that poverty was increasing during the late colonial period. In St Helena's parish, for example, half the poor relief cases and more than half the total amount expended on relief between 1726 and 1775 dated from just the last fifteen years.²⁵ Both the total number of paupers receiving relief, and the amounts expended by vestries to support them, more than doubled between the 1740s and the 1770s. Increases in the poor rates levied on local inhabitants, which rose by about 50 per cent between the 1740s and 1760s, suggest that the rise in relief cases was not simply the result of a larger population.²⁶ Since population estimates are unavailable for most parishes it is hard to state with precision what proportion of the rural populace was receiving help but it is probable that less than 1 per cent of the population was actually receiving relief at any one time.²⁷ This is a far lower proportion than in England, where historians estimate up to 8 per cent of the population received parish poor relief in the mid-eighteenth century, but it is comparable with other estimates of the number of rural southern relief recipients from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²⁸ Moreover, the proportion of paupers receiving relief in rural parishes was not that much smaller than in Charles-Town. The 880 individuals identified by Walter Fraser as receiving relief in Charles-Town between 1751 and 1773 average only 40 per year. With the white population of the city doubling from about 3,000 to about 6,000

²⁴ See for example, 'An act to encourage persons to become settlers in the province of South Carolina', passed 9 Dec. 1725, and 'An act for the better securing this province from Negro insurrections, and for encouraging of poor people by employing them on plantations', passed 11 Mar. 1726. Trott, *Laws*, I, pp. 462, 470–1. On the encouragement given to Georgia servants to settle in South Carolina see Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the sand: race and class in lowcountry Georgia* (Athens, GA, 2001), p. 17.

²⁵ 99 of 199 cases, and £3,555 18s 8d out of £6,193 15s 6d date from 1760–75.

²⁶ Poor rates averaged 2s 6d in the 1740s but had risen to 3s 9d by the 1760s.

²⁷ The white population of Christ Church parish was fairly constant at about 500, thus the 44 disbursements made by the vestry to 30 individual paupers between 1712 and 1755 means less than 1 per cent of the population was being assisted at any one time. Similarly St John's Berkeley, with a slightly larger population of about 600, made 52 disbursements to 22 individuals between 1739 and 1766. Rev Mr Pownall, Christchurch parish to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), 30 Oct. 1723. Brian Hunt to the SPG May 25, 1724. American Records of the SPG in Foreign Parts, Rhodes House Library, Oxford, Volume B4, Items 168 and 179; Everts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, *American population before the federal census of 1790* (New York, 1932), p. 177.

²⁸ See Slack, *The English poor law*, p. 22; Christopher S. Johnson, 'Poor relief in antebellum Mississippi', *Journal of Mississippi History*, 49 (1987), p. 1; Green, *This business of relief*, p. 16 (statistics from Truro Parish in eighteenth-century Virginia); sample relief rates for the Carolinas are Sampson County, NC 1820, 1.1 per cent; Fairfield County, SC 1830, 0.9 per cent; Williamsburg district, SC 1850, 1 per cent, 1860, 1.1 per cent; Union County SC 1860, 1.2 per cent; Granville County, NC 1860, 0.7 per cent. Commissioners of the Poor, Williamsburg district, 1831–68 (SCL), 8 Aug. 1850, 6 Aug. 1860; Commissioners of the Poor records, Fairfield and Union Counties (SCDAH); Minutes of the Wardens of the Poor, Granville County 1851–68 and Sampson County 1785–1824 (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina). Census figures are from fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census.

over the same period, the proportion assisted hovered around the 1 per cent mark.²⁹

In 1751 Governor James Glen estimated that 5,000 of the 25,000 white people in South Carolina existed on 'a bare subsistence' and one might surmise that demand for relief might come from up to a fifth of colonial settlers. Glen's estimate is given some weight by extant statistical glimpses of South Carolina's rural population that show that about a fifth of householders in St George's parish in 1726 did not own slaves, and a similar proportion in St James's, Goose Creek, in 1745 did not own land.³⁰ If Glen's estimate is anywhere near accurate, and a fifth of the colonial population was really just scraping by, then there is evidently no direct relationship between need and parish support since a fifth of the rural population clearly did not receive parish relief. The obvious question then becomes – why did so few people receive poor relief? One explanation might lie in the comment of Ebenezer Hazard in 1778 that 'the poor people of South Carolina are proud, the rich haughty and insolent, all of them remarkably indolent'.³¹ Accepting public poor relief placed recipients in a dependent position and since Alexander Hewatt thought that 'in respect of rank, all men regarded their neighbour as their equal', many would have gone to some lengths to avoid such a public loss of independence.³² It is likely that a significant number of rural paupers were taken in and cared for by family, friends, and neighbours, and therefore never received parish relief. Certainly John Tobler's understanding of poor relief in South Carolina was that 'old and sickly people' were taken in by 'good people ... [who] care for them without compensation'. Moreover some who might have become burdens to the parish may have been assisted privately with food, clothing, and other necessities that enabled them to stay in their own homes.³³ Joseph Arden, for example, left more than £1,000 in his will in 1773 'to the poor of St George's Parish', specifying that it should support 'aged and infirm

²⁹ Fraser, 'The city elite', pp. 167, 170.

³⁰ James Glen to the Board of Trade, March 1750–1, 'An attempt towards an estimate of the value of South Carolina'. Records in the British National Archives relating to South Carolina (microfilm, SCDAH), v.24, pp. 303–30. See also W. Stitt Robinson, *James Glen: from Scottish provost to royal governor of South Carolina* (Westport, CT, 1996), pp. 77–8. Menard, 'Slavery, economic growth and revolutionary ideology in the South Carolina lowcountry', pp. 263–4. See also Philip D. Morgan, 'A profile of a mid-eighteenth century South Carolina parish: the tax return of Saint James', Goose Creek', *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 81 (1980), pp. 51–65.

³¹ H. Roy Merrens, 'A view of coastal South Carolina in 1778: the journal of Ebenezer Hazard', *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 73 (1972), p. 186.

³² Hewatt, *Historical account*, II, p. 294; Weir, "'The harmony we were famous for'", p. 474. On the fierce independence of yeomen farmers in antebellum South Carolina see Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of small worlds: yeoman households, gender relations, and the political culture of the antebellum South Carolina low country* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 110–11, and Lacy K. Ford, Jr, *The origins of southern radicalism: the South Carolina low country, 1800–1860* (New York, 1988), p. 66.

³³ Walter L. Robbins, ed., 'John Tobler's description of South Carolina (1753)', *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 71 (1970), p. 258. On such ties among South Carolina's elite see Lorri Glover, *All our relations: blood ties and emotional bonds among the early South Carolina gentry* (Baltimore, 2000), p. 105.

persons of the parish'.³⁴ While the reach of most private benevolent societies such as the South Carolina Society (founded 1751) and the Fellowship Society (founded 1769) was limited to the city of Charles-Town, other societies did have an impact in the countryside. The John's Island Society in St John's Colleton, for instance, assisted 'poor persons, who, through unavoidable misfortunes, have fallen into indigence'.³⁵ These forms of charity are impossible to quantify in any meaningful way, but they might explain why so few individuals appear to have received parish relief.

In other colonial societies the harsh regimes of poorhouses, the stigmatization of paupers through the wearing of yellow badges, and the fear that children might be taken away and apprenticed out deterred many from applying for relief, but there is no evidence that any rural vestry in South Carolina ever forcibly removed a child or ordered a pauper to go to a poorhouse. In fact, rural vestries showed no interest in poorhouses or other institutions, preferring instead the system of outdoor relief, and this marks out rural South Carolina from much of the rest of British North America. Of course, vestrymen might have realized that outdoor relief was cheaper than institutionalization. One reason that poor relief bills rose so quickly in Charles-Town was because the vestry of St Philip's employed their own doctor to care for the poor, and paid for the running costs of the city workhouse.³⁶ While there was no prohibition on cash payments to paupers rural vestries often found it more practical to provide food, clothing, and medicine rather than cash sums, or to pay a third party to provide bed and board for the pauper. By treating their paupers with a modicum of dignity and individuality, rural vestries in South Carolina were out of step with many other welfare providers in colonial America.³⁷

III

Unlike almost any other social environment in colonial South Carolina, the day-to-day operation of the poor relief system brought the elite face-to-face with

³⁴ Minutes of the Dorchester Free School, 23 Apr. 1773 (SCDAH); Will of Joseph Arden, Will Book QQ, 1760–7, probated 30 Apr. 1762. For similar bequests see wills of Levi Guichard who left £100 to the poor of St James's parish, Goose Creek, and John Pagett, who left £200 to the poor of St Denis's parish. Will Book 1729–31, died 27 Feb. 1729; Will Book 1747–52, probated 4 Mar. 1747 (SCDAH).

³⁵ *South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal*, 28 Mar. 1769; 'An act for incorporating a society commonly called and known by the name of the John's Island Society Sept 9, 1779'. Thomas Cooper and David McCord, *The statutes at large of South Carolina* (10 vols., Columbia, 1836–41), VIII, p. 121 (quote).

³⁶ In 1751 the vestry spent £180 on a doctor, and £76 on supplies for the workhouse. The poor rate in 1752, reimbursing the churchwardens for the expenditure of 1751, raised £1,500. In 1739 the salary of the warden of the workhouse was £200, nearly 10 per cent of the expenditure on the poor that year. Accounts for 1751 and 1739, St Philip's Churchwardens' Account Book, 1725–52 (SCDAH). Easterby, 'Public poor relief in colonial Charleston', p. 85.

³⁷ For useful recent summaries of attitudes towards the poor in the colonial north see Herdnon, "'Who died an expence to this town'", and Karin Wulf, 'Gender and the political economy of colonial Philadelphia', both in Smith, ed., *Down and out in early America*, pp. 135–62, 163–88. See also Nash, 'Poverty and poor relief in pre-revolutionary Philadelphia', *passim*.

paupers.³⁸ Vestrymen were drawn from the highest echelons of South Carolina society and the willingness of the elite to serve on the vestry was most likely because of the important political and administrative role that vestries had in South Carolina.³⁹ While Robert Pringle might have famously described the job of churchwarden as being ‘attended with some trouble’, most of South Carolina’s merchant-planter elite served on vestries with minimal complaint. The vestry of St Helena’s parish, for example, recorded only seven occasions between 1726 and 1776 when individuals were elected but refused to serve as a vestryman or churchwarden.⁴⁰ The peculiarities of the South Carolina poor law ensured that vestrymen had more involvement with paupers than their counterparts elsewhere. Unlike in England, where overseers of the poor distributed money, assessed the poor rate, checked the eligibility of paupers for relief, and drove out those ineligible, in South Carolina responsibility for the poor was shared equally between the elected churchwardens and the overseers of the poor who were appointed by the vestry.⁴¹ Moreover, although the 1712 poor law ordered the appointment of overseers of the poor, only three of the eight rural parishes with vestry records actually did so, and then only sporadically.⁴² In parishes such as St Helena’s the vestry retained complete control over the distribution of poor relief. Even where overseers of the poor were chosen, they remained subordinate to the vestry, which still set the poor rate and distributed it.

Many who desired public assistance applied for it in person, ensuring that their public dependency appropriately reflected the differing statuses of giver and recipient. Vestry meetings were therefore a space where rich and poor

³⁸ Only the Charles-Town races and other similar leisure pursuits saw rich and poor intermingle to a significant degree. See William Hunt Boulware, ‘Lower class leisure in the lowcountry, 1770–1775’ (MA thesis, Warwick, 2004).

³⁹ Waterhouse, ‘The responsible gentry’, p. 161.

⁴⁰ Those who declined serving were fined £10. Waterhouse, *New world gentry*, pp. 134–9; George D. Terry, ‘“Champaign country”: a social history of an eighteenth century lowcountry parish in South Carolina, St John’s Berkeley County’ (Ph.D. thesis, South Carolina, 1981), p. 313; Walter B. Edgar, *The letterbook of Robert Pringle, 1: April 2, 1737–September 25, 1742* (Columbia, 1972), p. 211, entry for 20 May 1740. On occasion individuals refused to serve on the vestry because they probably felt they had already done sufficient service. Colonel William Hazzard, for example, had been a vestryman for seven of the previous ten years when he refused in 1738. After a four-year break he served again from 1742 to 1750. St Helena’s VM, 7 Aug. 1738. The dedication of vestrymen contrasts sharply with those chosen as JPs. Robert Olwell has recently argued that most JPs enjoyed the status without worrying unduly about the duties associated with the post. Robert Olwell, ‘“Practical justice”: the justice of the peace, the slave court, and local authority in mid-eighteenth-century South Carolina’, in Jack P. Greene, Rosemary Brana-Shute, and Randy J. Sparks, eds., *Money, trade, and power: the evolution of colonial South Carolina’s plantation society* (Columbia, 2001), pp. 256–77.

⁴¹ On the system of English parish government and its involvement in poor relief see Steve Hindle, *On the parish?: The micro-politics of poor relief in rural England, 1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004); idem, *The state and social change in early modern England, c. 1550–1640* (New York, 2000), ch. 8; Geoffrey W. Oxley, *Poor relief in England and Wales, 1601–1834* (London, 1974), pp. 34–50; Slack, *The English poor law*, pp. 18–36. On the overseers of the poor in England see W. E. Tate, *The parish chest: a study of the records of parochial administration in England* (Chichester, 1983), pp. 30–1.

⁴² The three (with years when overseers of the poor were appointed) were St David’s (1770–6), Prince Frederick’s (1731–2, 1756, 1758–70, 1772, 1775), and St John’s Colleton (1753–9, 1763). St Philip’s appointed overseers of the poor in 1770.

intersected, and where class and gender hierarchies were regularly reaffirmed. Vestrymen were not only all male, they were nearly all elite males too, so when poor women appeared in person before vestries they would have been acutely conscious of the need to emphasize their incapacity to care for themselves and their children. Ann Overstreet, for example, 'made complain that she was sick and destitute of the necessary supports of life', while Widow Hughes told Prince Frederick's vestry that she and her children were 'starving'.⁴³ Such language might well have been an accurate portrayal of individual problems, but it also appealed to vestrymen's patriarchal view of the world where care for dependent women, children, and slaves was seen to be the natural male role. But rural poor men were not above pleading for help as well. Mr Baldock, for instance, 'layd his distress before the church officers' of St John's Berkeley, correctly adopting the position of the humble supplicant. The vestry granted him £40.⁴⁴ The vestry of Prince Frederick's parish accepted Matthew Orchard as 'an object of charity' after he explained that he was 'unable to get his livinge for some time past'. Public acknowledgement of an inability to support oneself and one's family, in effect of dependency, was a significant step for any individual, but particularly so for a man who had previously been able to 'get his livinge'.⁴⁵

A number of the more literate applicants were able to put their petitions in writing but it was more common for the case for relief to be put to the vestry by a member on a claimant's behalf, despite there being no legal duty placed on vestrymen to seek out those eligible for relief.⁴⁶ For example, long-standing vestryman and local planter John Barnwell successfully obtained help for Mrs Heard from St Helena's parish, while Mrs Goofer enlisted the assistance of the churchwarden of St John's Berkeley, Benjamin Marion, in support of her application.⁴⁷ Vestryman James Ravenal even brought the case of Evans Hopkins who lived at the 'upper end' of the parish of St John's Berkeley, some distance from the parish church, to the attention of his fellow vestrymen. It is not known how Ravenal became aware of his situation.⁴⁸ Most commonly paupers were, like St Matthew's parish resident Jacob Smith, simply 'represented to the vestry' as

⁴³ St John's Berkeley VM, 26 Mar. 1744; Prince Frederick VM, 27 Sept. 1777. For other female applicants admitting their dependency see St Helena's VM, 17 Oct. 1758 (Mrs Gough); St Matthew's VM, 15 Apr. 1770 (Elizabeth Davis).

⁴⁴ St John's Berkeley VM, 29 Aug. 1739.

⁴⁵ Orchard later accepted £20 to go northwards, and 'not be any further trouble to the parish'. Prince Frederick's VM, 16 Apr. 1770, 15 July 1772. For other male applicants admitting their dependency see Christ Church's VM, 4 Apr. 1730 (William Burket) Prince Frederick's VM, 2 Nov. 1772 (Jacob Otmer); St David's VM, 4 July 1770 (William Davidson); St Helena's VM, 18 May 1753 (John Lillenton), 28 Sept. 1762 (John William Parsons); St John's Berkeley VM, 13 Sept. 1762 (Evans Hopkins).

⁴⁶ William Davidson successfully petitioned St David's parish vestry to support his wife. John Lillenton petitioned St Helena's parish vestry by letter. St David's VM, 4 July 1770; St Helena's VM, 18 May 1753.

⁴⁷ St Helena's VM, 16 July 1759; St John's Berkeley VM, 4 Jan. 1743.

⁴⁸ St John's Berkeley VM, 13 Sept. 1762.

worthy of help, perhaps by a vestryman, but maybe by friends or family and subsequently noted in the vestry minutes as being 'taken on the parish'.⁴⁹

Obviously, having the backing of one of the members of the vestry that judged an application was an advantage; but the inter-play of deference and patronage that occurred outside of vestry meetings in order to secure such support sadly remains obscure. We have no way of knowing if paupers approached vestrymen directly either in their own homes or perhaps after a church service, or if they went through an intermediary who would plead their case; perhaps a local planter who did not sit on the vestry, but knew those who did. At each stage the application, and the applicant, would have been judged to see if they were indeed a proper 'object of charity', but the criteria used to make such judgements were inevitably subjective. The most common designations assigned to the recipients of parish relief were simply 'poor', 'indigent', 'in great distress', or 'an object of charity' with no further details as to the cause of the 'distress' or how vestrymen measured the relative degree of poverty. Indeed, judging the causes of poverty among rural South Carolinians is not easy since in only a quarter of cases was anything other than the name of the recipient recorded in the vestry minutes. Aside from those simply designated 'poor', a small number were described as 'old', or noted as being blind, lame, mentally ill, or otherwise sick. Vestries often paid doctor's bills, but more frequently paid the burial costs of the poor. As one might expect, several of the women to receive relief were widows, usually with small children.

The fact that detailed reasons for poverty were not noted in the vestry minutes, combined with knowledge that relief cases were often put by individual vestrymen to their colleagues, emphasizes the importance of personal knowledge of the applicant. In numerically small societies it was relatively easy to know most of your neighbours, and for the richest and most important people in the parish to know who was poor and the reasons behind that poverty. Peter Manigault, speaker of the commons house of assembly in 1768 and one of the wealthiest men in South Carolina, confessed that even he was 'well acquainted with the circumstances of most of our inhabitants'.⁵⁰ When an individual either approached a vestryman, or went directly to the vestry itself, he or she would almost certainly have been known to several of those who would decide whether to grant relief. Vestrymen would have known the cause of poverty and recording the reasons in the minutes would have seemed superfluous.

Very few people applying for relief were refused assistance; indeed five of the eight parishes with extant vestry records did not record a single refusal in their

⁴⁹ St Matthew's VM, 23 Apr. 1767. It is possible that vestrymen used the poor relief system in order to garner support for the annual vestry elections, but it is unlikely that many paupers met the franchise qualifications set out in the church act of 1706 of being freeholders and taxpayers. Trott, *Laws*, 1, p. 138. See also Edward Joseph Boucher, 'Vestrymen and churchwardens in South Carolina, 1706-1778' (BA thesis, South Carolina, 1947), pp. 1-5.

⁵⁰ Peter Manigault to Charles Alexander, Spring 1768 cited in Weir, "'The harmony we were famous for'", p. 482.

minutes.⁵¹ Of course it is possible that the overseers of the poor, where they existed, acted as a gauze, filtering the ineligible from applying for relief. On one occasion the vestry of St David's parish used their overseer to collect information on a potential parish charge, requesting that he 'inform the vestry of the situation of the poor woman at Mr Benjamin James's'.⁵² Unfortunately there is simply insufficient information on the activities of the overseers of the poor to know whether this was really happening. The vestry minutes only record the end of the process of applying for poor relief. Most of the failed applications for relief were actually reapplications from those who had previously received assistance. Mary Parker, for example, was denied further help for her children by the vestry of St John's Colleton because she had remarried and presumably her children were now thought to be the responsibility of her new husband not the parish.⁵³ The same parish reduced the allowance of Hannah Hext in 1758 after it found out that she had claimed relief for a child that had been apprenticed.⁵⁴ As existing paupers these individuals may well have by-passed the filtering process by which the overseers of the poor or the churchwardens prevented applications reaching the vestry. These people were denied further relief because their situation had changed, or they had abused the system, thus becoming ineligible. Only once was help refused on the grounds that the applicant was able to support themselves. The widow Hughes applied for relief from Prince Frederick's parish, but rather than placing her on the roll of parish paupers, the vestry ordered that her children be placed out as 'apprentices in creditable houses' and that she herself should 'go to work to maintain herself & young child as she is verry able & a great deal of spinning offer'd her'.⁵⁵

The fact that so few applicants were refused assistance suggests that vestrymen saw themselves as benevolent providers of succour to the disadvantaged. But was this really the case? How were those receiving poor relief actually perceived by vestrymen? Did they share the opinions of Eliza Lucas, for instance, who believed the poor to be 'the most indolent people in the world, or they could never be wretched in so plentiful a country as this'; or those of New Englander, Josiah Quincy, who described the poorest people in South Carolina as 'spiritless peasants'.⁵⁶ Vestrymen had clear incentives to keep the costs of public poor relief down because in a significant departure from customary English practice, the poor rate in South Carolina *reimbursed* the expenses of the churchwardens and overseers of the poor for the preceding year, instead of being a front-loaded tax

⁵¹ Of eleven refusals, Prince Frederick's and St Helena's both refused one application, while St John's Colleton refused nine. ⁵² St David's VM, 3 May 1773.

⁵³ St John's Colleton VM, 1 Oct. 1759.

⁵⁴ Hannah Hext had originally been allowed £100 for herself and five children in 1752. *Ibid.*, 30 Mar. 1752, 9 Sept. 1758.

⁵⁵ Prince Frederick's VM, 27 Sept. 1777. St Philip's vestry in Charles-Town occasionally refused aid for similar reasons. Byrd, "'Ye have the poor always with you'", pp. 44-5.

⁵⁶ Elise Pinckney, ed., *Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1739-1762* (Columbia, 1997), pp. 39-40; 'Journal of Josiah Quincy, 1773', *Massachusetts Historical Society: Proceedings*, 49 (1916), p. 454.

for future expenditure. This meant that those serving as churchwardens and overseers had to be men of independent means, who could afford to, in effect, lend the parish money. Furthermore, since poor rates were levied on the amount of land and number of slaves owned they fell disproportionately on the elite. One way of gauging whether vestrymen sympathized with those they assisted is to measure the level of relief allowed to the poor. If just the bare minimum to avoid starvation was permitted then it would be clear that authorities believed that poor relief should be made as unappealing as possible, so that only the truly desperate would apply for it. Such a policy would reflect a concern among authorities that the number of paupers was an excessive burden on taxpayers, and therefore the low level of relief should act as a deterrent to applicants. Where more than a mere subsistence was provided, so that the poor were able to live modest, but not luxurious, lives, then attitudes towards the poor must have been considerably more relaxed, with authorities not especially concerned that the idle were trying to abuse the system.

In order to gauge just how generous rural poor relief was I have taken the cases of forty individuals from St Helena's, St John's Colleton and Prince Frederick's parishes who received relief for more than two years and can be termed 'chronically poor'. The typical chronic pauper was on the parish bounty for about six years and received about £50 per year in relief (c. £7 sterling).⁵⁷ Such a sum would have easily purchased sufficient supplies to sustain someone for a year since in the 1730s the secretary to the Georgia Trustees allowed for a similar sum per colonist when budgeting for a year's food supply. This, he calculated, would purchase 200 lb of beef, 114 lb each of rice, pease, and flour, 44 gallons of strong beer, 66 quarts of molasses, 18 lb of cheese, 9 lb of butter, 9 oz of spice, 9 lb of sugar, 5 gallons of vinegar, 30 lb of salt, 12 quarts of lamp oil, a pound of spun cotton, and 12 lb of soap. It is likely this sum was inflated to take into account the costs of importing food from South Carolina. While no allowance was made for fuel, rent, and clothing in the above list, prudent economies could make room for such necessities.⁵⁸ Importantly, £7 sterling was significantly more than paupers elsewhere in the Anglo-phone world received. Stephen Wiberley's comparative

⁵⁷ Of course there were exceptions to this generalization. It is doubtful that the vestry of Prince Frederick's parish considered that when Michael Cary was presented before them on 18 May 1757 'as an infirm and poor person, an object of charity, and incapable of labour having lost his eye sight' their successors would still be providing for him twenty-two years later. Prince Frederick's VM, 18 May 1757. Cary was still receiving relief when the minute book ends in 1779, having received more than £1,500 during that time.

⁵⁸ Stephen Wiberley has calculated that paupers in Charles-Town could live on half that amount, although food would have been cheaper in the city than in the rest of South Carolina. Ralph Gray and Betty Wood, 'The transformation from indentured to involuntary servitude in colonial Georgia', *Explorations in Economic History*, 13 (1976), pp. 367–8; [Benjamin Martyn], *An account shewing the progress of the Colony of Georgia in America from its first establishment* (London, 1741), pp. 38–9. The allowance of £7 per colonist is based on figures from the Trustees accounts. In 1735, for example, they allowed £5,063 for eighteen months' food for 470 people. Candler, ed., *The colonial records of the state of Georgia*, III, pp. 113 and 115. Stephen Edward Wiberley Jr, 'Four cities: public poor relief in urban America, 1700–1775' (Ph.D. diss., Yale, 1975), p. 158.

study of poor relief in eighteenth-century Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charles-Town concluded that levels of relief were significantly higher in Charles-Town (over £5 sterling per pauper per year) than in the northern cities (£3–£4 per pauper per year). Paupers in rural South Carolina received significantly more on average than those in Charles-Town (£7 sterling per pauper per year).⁵⁹

Some contemporaries were well aware of the generous nature of South Carolina's poor relief system. Thomas Nairn commented in 1710 that 'the charity of the inhabitants is very remarkable' since they were not prepared to 'suffer others of the same blood and nation, to be destitute of the common necessities of life' while John Tobler thought Carolinians to be 'very obliging, and kind to strangers and poor people'.⁶⁰ Yet explaining why elite South Carolinians funded a relatively generous poor relief system is not so easy. Of course one might argue that the small numbers receiving relief meant that vestries could afford to be generous. Yet there were, at least according to James Glen, plenty of other people in need in colonial South Carolina, and generous levels of relief are normally believed to encourage applications for poor relief since the marginal benefits of working do not merit the effort involved. However, when compared to the inflated wages that local artisans commanded in South Carolina it is clear that few would have accepted parish relief in preference to employment. According to several contemporaries, the scarcity of skilled carpenters, bricklayers, and tailors in the province meant that they commanded wages of £60 or even £70 sterling per year. Even the 'common wages of a workman' were about £35 sterling per year.⁶¹ This reinforces the, admittedly limited, evidence that many parish paupers were elderly, sick, or otherwise incapacitated and unable to work.

The provision of relief to the poor was, of course, a Christian duty, one that vestrymen were reminded of by ministers. Samuel Quincy, for example, told his audience in St Philip's church in Charles-Town that charity was 'more excellent than faith and hope' and that 'true benevolence' would earn divine approbation.⁶² Unlike in Charles-Town, rural vestrymen never once publicly

⁵⁹ Wiberley, 'Four cities', p. 158. In England, by comparison, paupers in York received an average of £1 14s 6d per year in 1716, those in Salisbury in 1725 received £3 8s 4d, and those in the south-east of England received between £1 and £2. Slack, *Poverty and policy*, pp. 176–7. D. A. Baugh, 'The cost of poor relief in southeast England 1790–1834', *Economic History Review* 28 (1975), p. 56.

⁶⁰ Thomas Nairn, *A letter from South Carolina* (London, 1710), pp. 42–3; Robbins, ed., 'John Tobler's description', p. 144. George Milligen agreed that South Carolinians 'exceed most people in acts of benevolence, hospitality and charity'. George Milligen, *A short description of the province of South Carolina* (London, 1770), p. 24.

⁶¹ Jean Pierre Purry reported that 'a skilful carpenter is not ashamed to demand 30s per day' equating to £7 10s a week, £420 a year (£60 sterling). James Glen put house carpenter's wages at 40s per day, equating to £500 per year (just over £71 sterling). John Martin Bolzius was more circumspect, suggesting that skilled artisans could earn £24 sterling per year. 'Mr Purry's account of Carolina', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 2 (Sept. 1732), p. 969; Glen, 'An attempt towards an estimate', p. 319; George Fenwick Jones, ed., *Detailed reports on the Salzburger emigrants who settled in America ... edited by Samuel Uirlsperger* (18 vols., Athens, GA, 1989), xiv, p. 88, entry for 8 July 1750.

⁶² Samuel Quincy, *Twenty sermons ... preached in the parish of St Philip, Charles-Town, South Carolina* (Boston, 1750), pp. 261–2.

complained about poor rates or about the burdens that the poor placed on the parish revenues. While one should be cautious about drawing conclusions from such silences in the records, it is true that those paying the poor rate could afford it. Richard Waterhouse established that the average estate wealth of vestrymen in St John's Colleton was £3,162 sterling (£22,134 South Carolina currency). Poor rates in the parish in 1760 were set at 1s 6d per slave, 1s 6d per 100 acres and 9d on money at interest. Again according to Waterhouse, the average vestryman owned sixty-three slaves, and thus would have owed £4 16s 6d. If we add a hypothetical land holding of 5,000 acres that adds a further £3 15s, with maybe a small additional sum for money at interest. Such a vestryman would have therefore paid about £8–£9 (SC currency) in poor tax in 1760.⁶³ South Carolinian planters constituted the richest social group in North America, and when rural planters compared their personal wealth with the poor tax bill the latter would have seemed insignificant in comparison.

Another possibility is that elite vestrymen used poor relief to differentiate publicly between whites and blacks: even though free blacks were not legally excluded from relief, there are no instances of them receiving it. The poor relief system was effectively racially exclusive, binding poor whites to the elite with ties of dependency and patronage. Elite South Carolinians were perfectly aware of the large black majority in their colony and this was never more obvious in the lowcountry parishes that were home to large rice and indigo plantations.⁶⁴ To allow poor whites to subsist on the same meagre rations as slaves, who were, as one historian has recently argued, the real paupers in colonial America, would have suggested that whites existed on the same basic human level as the enslaved, thereby weakening the racial basis of slavery.⁶⁵ In 1751 Johann Martin Bolzius, pastor of the Salzburger community at Ebenezer in Georgia, estimated that South Carolina planters spent just £1 8s a year providing food for each slave, only a fifth of what South Carolina's vestrymen were giving to their white parish paupers.⁶⁶ Clearly, vestrymen had no desire to reduce parish paupers to living on the same rations as slaves and by setting public relief at a far more generous rate

⁶³ Waterhouse, *New world gentry*, p. 134; St John's Colleton VM, 15 May 1760. Elite planters willingly paid more than £50 (SC currency) for '2 plaine mahogany bedsteads', while St Helena's vestryman John Barnwell paid £150 for a mahogany desk and book case. Thomas Elfe Account Book, Apr. and May 1772, Charleston Library Society.

⁶⁴ For example, South Carolinians told Josiah Quincy that there were about seven blacks to every white. 'Journal of Josiah Quincy', p. 456. In 1790, in Charleston district, which encompassed St John's Berkeley, St John's Colleton, and Christ Church as well as several other parishes, 15,402 whites were out-numbered by 50,633 slaves. Greene and Harrington, *American population*, pp. 177–9.

⁶⁵ Philip D. Morgan, 'Slaves and poverty' in Smith ed., *Down and out in early America*, pp. 93–131.

⁶⁶ Klaus G. Loewald, Beverly Staricka, and Paul S. Taylor, eds., 'Johann Martin Bolzius answers a questionnaire on Carolina and Georgia, Part 1', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 14 (1957) pp. 245–6. Of course, lowcountry slaves supplemented this diet by growing their own food and exchanging surpluses through what scholars have termed the 'informal' or 'internal' economy. For more on the informal economic activities of slaves see Betty Wood, *Women's work, men's work: the informal slave economies of lowcountry Georgia, 1750–1830* (Athens, GA, 1995); Robert Olwell, *Masters, slaves and subjects: the culture of power in the South Carolina lowcountry, 1740–1790* (Ithaca, NY, 1998), pp. 141–80; Philip

they showed that there were privileges of race to which all whites were entitled. Indeed most parishes went to great lengths to tailor relief to individuals, something that could only be done after a proper investigation into their particular circumstances. In August 1746, for example, the vestry of St John's Colleton paid for clothes for Grace Andrews; for the board of Hannah Westbury and Mrs Dunmere; for medical care, board, and sundries for Mrs Peckham; and costs associated with the death of Thomas Gregory, including a coffin and the hire of a 'wench' who cared for him in his final days.⁶⁷

The poor relief system therefore stood, in part, as a testament to white solidarity, especially when that solidity was thought to be lacking. Elites in colonial South Carolina were extremely concerned about the potential for class alliances between poor whites and their slaves, with grand jury presentments frequently complaining that shopkeepers traded illegally with the enslaved; corrupting them with alcohol in return for stolen goods.⁶⁸ Even more worrying was when white servants fled together with slaves to join criminal gangs roaming the countryside, or were suspected of being involved in plots to rise up against white authority.⁶⁹ Anything that divided poor whites from slaves was therefore a good thing and the grand jury even sought to defend white working people from enslaved competition through restrictions on the economic activities of blacks.⁷⁰ Indeed, there seems to be a direct correlation between the proportion of whites in a society and the level of poor relief offered. In northern colonies, where whites far outnumbered blacks, poor relief was broadly comparable to English levels, but in Charles-Town, where there were roughly equal numbers of whites and blacks, poor relief was considerably more generous. Outside Charles-Town, where whites were heavily outnumbered, relief was more generous still, and it marked a clear boundary between poorer whites and slaves.

IV

Adults who were 'on the parish' were therefore the beneficiaries of racial tensions within rural society in South Carolina. Even more important to the future well-being of a society deeply divided on racial lines was that poor white children should be afforded every opportunity not to follow in their parents' footsteps. Unlike adults, children were ineligible for long-term support from the public purse since the 1712 poor law stipulated that all orphan children should be bound

D. Morgan, *Slave counterpoint: black culture in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, 1998), pp. 358–76.

⁶⁷ St John's Colleton VM, 22 Aug. 1746.

⁶⁸ Morgan, *Slave counterpoint*, pp. 308, 367, 413. See also Presentments of the Grand Jury of South Carolina, 19 Jan. 1770 and 17 May 1774, Journal of Court of General Sessions, 1769–76 (SCDAH). In the 1774 presentment, the grand jury claimed that 'wanton, mischievous and thievish' slaves were 'a great means of preventing industry amongst the poorer sort of white inhabitants'.

⁶⁹ Morgan, *Slave counterpoint*, pp. 304–7. Philip D. Morgan and George D. Terry, 'Slavery in microcosm: a conspiracy scare in colonial South Carolina', *Southern Studies*, 21 (1982), pp. 137–42; Olwell, *Masters, slaves and subjects*, pp. 226–43.

⁷⁰ *South Carolina Gazette*, 25 Oct. 1760 and 18 Oct. 1774.

out as apprentices; girls until they reached eighteen, boys until they reached twenty-one.⁷¹ The commitment to care for a child was a substantial one, and not to be entered into lightly, but the economic advantages for masters should not be overlooked since those taking apprentices obtained free labour for the length of the indenture in return, only having to find board, clothing, and food, not wages, for their charges. This system was open to abuse, as masters might overwork, exploit, and perhaps brutalize the children in their care for a lengthy period. The copy of one indenture, recorded in the vestry minutes of St John's Berkeley, shows what vestries expected from apprentices. Under the terms of his indenture to blacksmith David Geddy, Michael Butcher, 'a poor vagabond boy', was not only forbidden to harm his master's business or possessions, he was also not permitted to 'play at cards ... absent himself day nor night from his said master's service, nor haunt ale houses, taverns, or playhouses', furthermore 'he shall not commit fornication nor contract matrimony during the said term'.⁷² Michael Butcher found his personal freedom severely restricted, but by the end of his ten-year apprenticeship he should have learned to read and write, and enough of the blacksmith trade to earn a living for the rest of his life. His quality of life after the apprenticeship would have been far higher than if he had been left to grow up as a 'poor vagabond boy'. Indeed, parish vestries generally imposed greater duties on those who took orphan children as apprentices than the minimum specified by law. Many masters had to provide some basic education so that, on reaching the age of majority, their charges would have a modicum of literacy and numeracy, even though the 1740 'act concerning masters and apprentices' made no such demand. Girls as well as boys received tuition, though only boys were taught a trade. Furthermore many children received Bibles, clothing, and livestock from their former masters, all of which was intended to ensure their future economic security as well as their moral probity.⁷³

Several parishes went further in their efforts to ensure that poor children were better able to support themselves by providing free education. Children in Charles-Town were able to attend the provincial free school that operated periodically from 1712. However, aware that it would not be practical for children in rural areas to travel to Charles-Town for tuition, the assembly ordered the public treasury to contribute £12 towards the cost of school construction in each

⁷¹ 1712 Poor Law, Sec. 8, Trott, *Laws*, 1, p. 273. Vestries usually followed this custom, making exceptions only for very young children such as Alexander Kelly, an infant who was boarded at William Lewiston's house by the vestry of St Matthew's parish. St Matthew's VM, 20 Apr. 1772.

⁷² St John's Berkeley VM, 7 Aug. 1749, 3 Oct. 1750. As far as can be ascertained this is the only extant orphan indenture in colonial South Carolina, and was strikingly similar to those in eighteenth-century England. See Joan Lane, *Apprenticeship in England, 1600-1914* (London, 1996), pp. 81-3.

⁷³ See for example St David's VM, 20 Apr. 1772; 3 June and 13 Sept. 1773. The 1745 act 'for the better governing and regulating white servants' only required masters to provide freed servants with decent clothing. John Faucheraud Grimke, *The public laws of the state of South Carolina* (Philadelphia, 1790), p. 196. Vestries in other southern colonies made similar demands. See Nelson, *A blessed company*, p. 74; Watson, 'Orphanage in colonial North Carolina', p. 109; Carr, 'The development of the Maryland orphan's court', p. 52.

rural parish, and £10 towards the salary of each teacher.⁷⁴ The take-up of this early attempt to provide a public education system in South Carolina was slow, but by the time of the Revolution schools were definitely operating in four rural parishes; St Helena's, St Thomas and St Denis's, St John's Berkeley, and St George's Dorchester. Although the legislative provision for education was no doubt welcome, the majority of free school funds came from legacies. For instance, the former rector of St Helena's parish, Lewis Jones, left £100 sterling to establish a school in Beaufort. His will explicitly instructed the churchwardens to 'recommend such poor children whose parents are not capable to pay for their schooling' and to give preference to those 'who are orphans and are left poor and destitute'. For the remainder of the colonial era, the vestry of St Helena's used the interest on the legacy to pay about £60 a year for the instruction of six local poor children.⁷⁵ A similar school was established in St Thomas's parish with a substantial legacy from Richard Beresford. Alexander Garden Jr reported to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in 1749 that the school was in a 'flourishing condition' educating about five poor children free of charge each year, and he later took pleasure that the school produced 'sober, industrious, and useful members of society'.⁷⁶ The Free School at Childsbury in St John's Berkeley was finally opened in 1749, sixteen years after the legislature passed an act permitting its foundation and more than twenty-five years after the rector of the parish had reported the schoolmaster would receive a salary of £50; the Free School in St George's Dorchester took even longer to grow from a plan in 1734 to the employment of the first teacher in 1761, but a small number of poor children were given a free education in South Carolina before the Revolution.⁷⁷

The overall effect of small amounts of money educating so few children was, of course, negligible. However, despite these failures, it is the value rural vestries placed on the education of poor children that is revealing. Indeed many more schools were planned than actually opened. Although it has long been argued that the nineteenth-century popularity of public education in America was motivated by civic republicanism and a desire to mould youth into an acceptable

⁷⁴ 'An act for the founding and erecting of a free school in Charlestown, for the use of the inhabitants of this province of South Carolina', passed 12 Dec. 1712, Secs. 21 and 22, Cooper and McCord, *Statutes at large*, II, p. 395. See also Edgar Legare Pennington, 'The Reverend Thomas Morritt and the free school in Charles Town', *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 32 (1931), pp. 34–45.

⁷⁵ St Helena's VM, 22 June 1748, 30 May 1765.

⁷⁶ Rev Alex Garden, Jr of St Thomas's parish to the SPG, 7 Apr. 1749, B17/176. Frederick Dalcho, *An historical account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina* (Charleston, 1820), p. 292.

⁷⁷ 'An act for erecting a free school at Childsbury', passed 9 June 1733, and 'An act for founding and erecting, governing, ordering and visiting a free school in the town of Dorchester, in the parish of St George, in Berkeley County, for the use of the inhabitants of the province of South Carolina', passed 9 Apr. 1734, Cooper and McCord, *Statutes at large*, III, pp. 364–6, 378–81. On the Childsbury School see the Minutes of the Trustees of Childsbury School, 1749–55 (SCL), and Brian Hunt to the SPG, 30 Oct. 1723, B4/167; on the Dorchester School see Minutes of the Commissioners for the Dorchester Free School, 1757–79 (SCDAH), and Judith R. Joyner, *Beginnings: education in colonial South Carolina* (Columbia, 1985), pp. 24–7.

elite self-image, the colonial roots of that ideology are not so well understood.⁷⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the growth of antebellum educational reform movements it is clear that, in South Carolina at least, leading colonists were already sensitive to the advantages that an educated populace could bring. Josiah Smith, for example, told parishioners in St John's Berkeley that 'if we train up a child, in the way he should go, he will not depart from it, when he is old'. The provincial legislature stated that 'nothing conduces more to the private advantage of every man, or the public benefit of a country in general, than a liberal education' while the provincial grand jury agreed that schools 'have a happy tendency to promote the good and welfare of ... the community in general' and made repeated presentments for more schools to be built.⁷⁹ This positive view of education was shared by other South Carolinians outside of Charles-Town. Fifty-eight residents of St James's Goose Creek subscribed £2,280 towards the cost of school construction declaring that 'nothing is more likely to promote the practice of Christianity and virtue, than the early and pious education of youth'. The inhabitants of St George's Dorchester noted that 'the chief source of irreligion and immorality here, is the want of schools, and we may justly be apprehensive, that if our children continue longer to be deprived of opportunities of being instructed, Christianity will of course decay insensibly, and we shall have a generation of our own, as ignorant as the native Indians'.⁸⁰ It was fears such as these that prompted the Winyaw Indigo Society, founded in 1755, to fund the education of a 'great number' of Georgetown children believing it would 'be of great advantage to the religious as well as the civil concerns of this province'.⁸¹ The founder members of the St David's Society, formed in 1777 to promote public education in St David's parish, also stressed the 'social virtues' of schooling. Without mass education, they warned, 'the most flourishing republics have become the tools of arbitrary tyrants'.⁸² This was never more relevant than in the midst of the revolutionary war.

⁷⁸ On the rise of public education movements see Carl F. Kaestle, *The evolution of an urban school system: New York City, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, MA, 1973); Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the republic: common schools and American society, 1780-1860* (New York, 1983); Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The rise of literacy and the common school in the United States: a socioeconomic analysis to 1870* (Chicago, 1981).

⁷⁹ Josiah Smith, *The duty of parents to instruct their children: being the substance of several sermons preach'd at Cainhoy, in the province of South Carolina, Anno Dom. 1727* (Boston, 1730), p. 8. 'An act for founding and erecting, governing, ordering and visiting a free school in the town of Dorchester', Cooper and McCord, *Statutes at large*, III, p. 378. *South Carolina Gazette*, 8 June 1765, 9 May 1768, 16 Oct. 1769.

⁸⁰ Dalcho, *An historical account*, pp. 255, 347.

⁸¹ Act of Incorporation, 21 May 1757, *Rules of the Winyaw Indigo Society with a short history of the society* (Charleston, 1874), p. 3.

⁸² Declaration of purpose, 31 Jan. 1778. St David's Society Minutes 1777-1835 (microfilm SCL), 3. Several other rural education societies were established during the Revolution. See 'An act for incorporating a society commonly called the Mount Sion Society', passed 13 Feb. 1777 (in Camden district); 'An act for incorporating a society commonly called the Catholic Society', passed 5 Mar. 1778 (in Camden district); 'An act for incorporating a society commonly called the Salem Society', passed 16 Mar. 1778 (in Ninety-six district), Cooper and McCord, *Statutes at large*, v, pp. 8, 114-16, 117-18.

V

The emphasis placed on the education of poor children suggests that rural vestrymen saw themselves as guardians of the existing social order in South Carolina. With an education paid for out of public funds, and perhaps an apprenticeship arranged and policed by the vestry, poor children were clearly directed towards the path of virtuous citizenship. As adults, it was to be hoped that they would remember the state's role in their childhood and the investment that it had made in them. Most importantly, poor children, and other paupers as well, should identify with their benefactors and with the established racial hierarchies. If the non-elite were taught to share elite principles then they would not fraternize, trade, aid, or sleep with slaves, nor have doubts as to the usefulness of the slave system. As Josiah Smith noted, 'Governments are never more happy, than ... when they can fill the posts of honour with sons of their own principles & education'.⁸³ A properly functioning poor relief system had benefits for all segments of white society in colonial South Carolina since it elevated poor whites above the subsistence levels experienced by slaves, while helping to defuse social tensions and reinforce racial hierarchies. Those receiving poor relief in rural South Carolina were generally treated better than paupers in other colonies. They received a relatively generous level of support, they were not institutionalized or stigmatized, and settlement laws were not rigorously enforced. By being financially liberal, vestrymen were also being politically conservative since a more cohesive white society made their own social position more secure. Many economic, religious, racial, and familial ties bound white South Carolinians together, but the poor relief system was an important, and hitherto unheralded, part of the gel that united white society in colonial South Carolina.

⁸³ Smith, *The duty of parents*, p. 33.