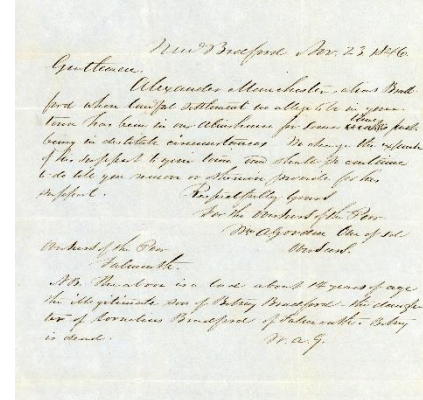


Who Will Care for Alexander? by Terry White and Meg Costello

In November 1846, John Jenkins, overseer of the poor in Falmouth, received a letter from William Gordon, his counterpart in New Bedford. Gordon put Jenkins on notice that Falmouth would be charged for the expenses incurred in caring for a youth named Alexander Manchester at the New Bedford almshouse.



Gordon wrote, “Alexander Manchester, alias Bradford, whose lawful settlement we allege to be in your town, has been in our almshouse for some time past, being in destitute circumstances. We charge the expense of his support to your town and shall so continue to do till you remove or otherwise provide for his support.”

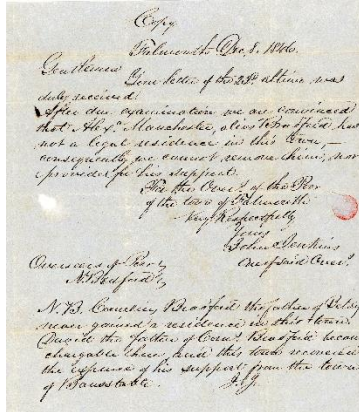
Jenkins had a ready reply. On December 8, 1846, he wrote back, politely but firmly dashing Gordon’s hopes for reimbursement. “After due examination we are convinced that Alex. Manchester, alias Bradford has not a legal residence in this town, consequently we cannot remove him, nor provide for his support.”

Who was this unlucky young man who seemed to belong nowhere? William Gordon described him as “a lad about 14 years of age, the illegitimate son of Betsy Bradford, the daughter of Cornelius Bradford of Falmouth. Betsy is dead.”

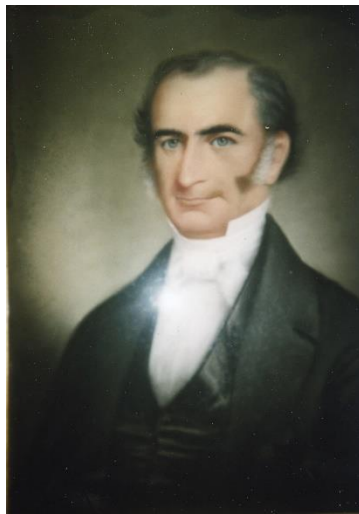
The safety net in nineteenth century New England followed a hierarchy of responsibility. First in line was the family of the person in need—parents, grandparents and members of the extended family. Alexander had three strikes against him, being without a father or a mother, and bearing the stigma of illegitimacy as well. In cases like his, where family support was not forthcoming, the town became responsible for his care—but what if the town wouldn’t acknowledge him as a resident?

Massachusetts poor laws decreed that towns had the duty to care for their own residents—i.e., people who were “settled” within their borders. This system, which had roots in Elizabethan England, broke down as American society became ever more mobile, and people refused to stay put.

Generally, anyone who was allowed to settle in a town and to remain for a given length of time without being “warned out,” or asked to leave, was considered a resident. The Provincial Laws of 1692 required three months to establish residency, while by 1794, the requirement was five years. Residency could also be achieved by birth or marriage to a resident, by property ownership, or by the “approbation” of town meeting.



John Jenkins explained to William Gordon in his letter of refusal, “Cornelius Bradford, the father of Betsy, never gained a residence in this town. David the father of Corn^s Bradford became chargeable here [i.e., received poor relief] and this town recovered the expense of his support from the town of Barnstable.” Jenkins is hinting that Gordon ought to send the bill for Alexander to Barnstable, where the young man’s great-grandfather had been accepted as a legal resident.



A search of local vital records turns up few details on the Bradford clan. A Cornelius Bradford arrived in Falmouth around 1804, with his wife Elizabeth. It’s possible that they are Betsy’s parents, and that she was already born to them before they moved to Falmouth. The couple had three children here, before Elizabeth apparently died around 1810. A Cornelius Bradford married Mary Baker in 1811, had two children, and died in 1821. If all of these records pertain to the same man, then Cornelius Bradford managed to live in Falmouth for seventeen years, and have five children here, without gaining settlement.

Birth and death records for Betsy and her son Alexander have not been found. Records suggest that Betsy herself had a run-in with the Falmouth overseers of the poor long before her son ever did. On June 3, 1828, the overseers “agreed to charge the Town of

Barnstable sixty-seven cents a week for the support of Elisabeth Bradford [until] June 17th the day that Mr. Charles Marston came to remove her to Barnstable.” Could this Elizabeth Bradford be our Betsy?

John Jenkins and William Gordon were probably not heartless men. They fulfilled their duty to aid needy “transients” in their towns. They also relied on a 1793 state law that allowed overseers to remove non-residents “to the places of their lawful settlements” and to sue for their expenses. By taking advantage of that law, no doubt Jenkins and Gordon saw themselves as good stewards of public funds.

As for Alexander, we have not been able to trace him beyond the almshouse in New Bedford. The 1850 U.S. Census may offer us a glimpse of him. In that year, an 18-year-old named Alexander Manchester, native of Massachusetts, was living in the household of Hannah Manchester in New York City. This young man is listed with no occupation, but neither is he categorized as disabled, insane, a pauper, or a convict.

We can only hope that Alexander found a place for himself at last.

Many thanks to the H. Stanley Bresnick Foundation for donating these letters to the Falmouth Historical Society. For more stories and information about the town's poor relief system, please visit our website www.museumsonthegreen.org/archives