



Caring for the Poor: Thetford and the Baker Family, 1792–1817

What is perhaps surprising is the extent to which the people of Thetford rallied around to support their own poor. The citizens of Thetford cared for Elizabeth Baker from 1792 until her death in 1812, and for John Baker until his disappearance in 1817, while the four children bound out were placed in some of the leading families of the area.

By MARY L. EYSENBACH

Vermont in its years of independence adopted the practice of colonial New England and made public assistance the responsibility of the towns, continuing that practice into the twentieth century. How one town shouldered that responsibility in Vermont's early years can be seen in Thetford town records concerning the Baker family, which was under the care of the selectmen for twenty-five years, from 1792 until 1817. These old town records were entrusted by Thetford town clerks to the care of the Thetford Historical Society, thus preserving them for researchers.¹

The 1787 Vermont poor law (“An Act Providing for and Ordering Transient, Idle, Impotent, and Poor Persons, March 9, 1787”) provided

That when and so often as it shall happen that any person or persons shall be naturally wanting of understanding so as to be unable to provide for themselves, or by the providence of God, by age, sickness,

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or otherwise become poor and impotent, or unable to provide for themselves, and have no Estate wherewith they may be supported, they and every of them, shall be provided for . . .²

The law made close relatives (father, mother, grandparent, child, or grandchild) responsible for support, if they were able. But

if such Idiot, distracted, poor and impotent persons, have not estate (the income of which being improved or disposed of as aforesaid) sufficient for their support, and no relations appear to provide for them, or stand in so near a degree that they may be compelled thereto, in every such case the selectmen or overseer of the poor in the town where such person is by Law an inhabitant, be, and they are hereby empowered, to take effectual care and make necessary provision for the relief, support, and safety of such person at the charge of the town, or place where he or she of right belongs, or if they belong to no town or place, in this or the other American States, then, at the cost of this State.³

After the 1797 revision of the statute, selectmen were also to provide medical care as they “shall judge necessary.”⁴

Poor children “exposed to want and distress”⁵ could be bound out as apprentices or servants, a male child to age twenty-one years, a female to age eighteen years.⁶ In the 1797 revision, overseers were directed to ensure the indentures were “equitable and for the benefit of the person so bound out” and to “endeavor to redress wrongs.”⁷ Males were to be taught to read and write, females to read.

Taken together these provisions placed a substantial burden on a town. In the decade after 1810 care of the poor accounted for over half of Thetford’s town budget.⁸ It is not surprising that Vermont towns, especially those along the Connecticut River that had a large influx of newcomers after the American Revolution, “warned out” indigents from elsewhere, requiring them to move on, because, until 1787, legal residency was established by one year’s stay in a town; the 1787 poor law introduced a property qualification of £200.⁹ What is perhaps surprising is the extent to which the people of Thetford rallied around to support their own poor. Thetford experienced more than a five-fold increase of families from 1771 to 1791, about a doubling every decade.¹⁰ Although many families were from towns of eastern Connecticut (chiefly Hebron and Lebanon, but also Mansfield, Pomfret, Stonington, and others), most were not long established in Thetford and had not grown up together there. The citizens of Thetford cared for Elizabeth Baker from 1792 until her death in 1812, and for John Baker until his disappearance in 1817, while the four children bound out were placed in some of the leading families of the area.

After four years in the Continental Army, including the winter at Valley Forge, John Baker moved from Mansfield, Connecticut, to Thetford, Vermont, where in August 1781 he purchased fifty acres of land for £20.¹¹ He married Elizabeth Rich of Strafford, Vermont, in July 1782,¹² and by 1792 had a family of six children ranging in age from eleven to a newborn.¹³ But John and Elizabeth Baker did not prosper. The grand lists (tax rolls) of 1784 and 1785 show John as one of the smaller taxpayers in town, and he does not appear on grand lists of 1788 or thereafter.¹⁴ Sometime in that first decade in Vermont John Baker became mentally ill and could not care for his family. The Thetford selectmen took the action required of them by Vermont's poor law:

2 June 1792 Whereas John Baker an Inhabitant of this Town has become Insane in mind and altogether unfit to trade and do business necessary for the support of himself and family and has by his indolent mismanagement become reduced to a state of necessity and want, therefore we the subscribers by virtue of authority vested in us and according to a certain statute law of this state have for the safety of this town and good of the family of the said John taken into our care all the Estate both personal & real which we know of belonging to the said John to the intent that the same together with the Earnings of the said John & wife may be the better applied as the Law in that case provides, for their support therefore no bargain or contract of any kind made with the said John after this date by any person whatever will be considered valued and good in Law for the time being but such as is allowed and approved by Mr. William Child of this Town who has charge of the same and all rights to superintend therein. By order of Israel Smith, Jonathan Nichols, Selectmen. Thetford, 2nd June 1792¹⁵

Less than a week after the selectmen's order, on June 8, 1792, "John and Elizabeth Baker, persons under the care of the selectmen of Thetford," sold their land for £40; they acknowledged the sale as "their own voluntary act and deed," June 10, 1792.¹⁶ Although this was a forced sale, the price appears to have been fair, because when the land was resold a year later the price was the same.

When Thetford declared John Baker insane in 1792 the town made itself responsible for the welfare of his children. As the law provided, the younger Baker children were soon bound out as servants to other families. In November 1792, the youngest boy, Simon, "about four years of age," went to William Judd of Strafford. In March 1793, Anne, "two years old last May," was indentured to William Moor, Jr. The same day Abigail, "about ten months old," was indentured to serve John Way, with the added notation "when arrived to the age and ability of service." Five years later Zechariah, then twelve years old, was indentured to Captain William Heaton.¹⁷

Each of these young children, even Abigail at ten months, was indentured to serve and dwell with his or her master until each came of age, the girls at eighteen, the boys at twenty-one. Similar wording is found in all the indentures. For example:

19 March 1793 This Indenture is made this Nineteenth Day of March In the Year of our Lord Seventeen Hundred Ninety three—Witnesseth that James White, Josiah Hubbard & William Sackett Select Men & Overseers of the Poor In the Town of Thetford In the County of Orange & State of VERMONT—Have put and place & by these presents do put & place Abigail Baker A Poor Girl who hath become a Town Charge to said Town—A Girl Servant to John Way of said Thetford. With him to serve and dwell from the Day of this Date of these presents until the said Abigail shall Accomplish and Arrive to the full Age of Eighteen Years: According to the Statute for such cases made & provided—During all which term the said Abigail her said Master shall Serve (when Arrived to the Age & Ability of Service) in all Lawfull Business. According to her Power Witt & Ability and shall Honestly Orderly & Obediently In all things demean herself and Behave towards her said Master Durth said Term—And the Said John Way In Consideration of the Sum of Ten pounds Nineteen Shillings being to his full Satisfaction and also the Services of said Girl—For himself his Executors and Administrators Doth Covenant and Grant to and with the said Selectmen & Overseers of the Poor and Every of them by these presents and their and Every of their Successors for the time being. That he the said Way shall and will Cause to be Instructed in the Business & Art of Housewifery the said Abigail and In the Art of reading and Writing &c Suitable for a Housewife And during all said term find provide & Allow the said Abigail Sufficient Meat Drink Lodging & Apparel and all other things Necessary & Fitt for her Comfortable Subsistence and also shall & will provide for the said Abigail Baker in such manner so that she shall not in any wise become Cheargable to the Town of Thetford but from the same and Each Inhabitant thereof save harmless for and During said Term. And at the End of the Term the said Way Engages to furnish the said Abigail with two New suits of Cloths compleat one suitable for Holy Days the other suitable for Labour In—In Witness whereof the Parties have Interchangeable placed their hands & Seal the Day & Year above Mentioned. The girl now about Ten Months Old.

/s/ John Way, James White, Josiah Hubbard, Wm Sackett
In presence of /s/ Israel Smith, Oramel Hinckley¹⁸

Such indentures sound harsh to modern ears, but the selectmen expected of the indentured children only what parents then expected of their own children. Vermont law required only reading for girls and reading and writing for boys. Thetford demanded of masters more than what Vermont law mandated: the girls were to be taught reading, writing, and “housewifery,” and the boys reading, writing, husbandry, and “cyphering suitable for a farmer.”

The families who took in these four children were all substantial members of their communities and they received minimal compensation for raising the young children. Captain William Heaton, who took twelve-year-old Zechariah Baker, received only the services of the boy and no other consideration. Heaton was a former Thetford selectman and town leader. He was by far the town's largest taxpayer according to the grand lists. William Judd, who took four-year-old Simon, was an early settler of Strafford, financially middling according to the Strafford grand lists, and a fellow townsman of Elizabeth Rich's parents, Jonathan and Abigail Rich. He had several children of Simon's age. The Judds received a cow in compensation for raising Simon. William Moor, Jr., received £4.12s. when he took in two-year-old Anne Baker. Moor was in the top third of Thetford taxpayers on the 1791 grand list, and his father was also a substantial taxpayer there. John and Nellie Way, who took the infant, Abigail, received the largest compensation, £10.19s. The Ways were newcomers to Thetford, but already members of the church, and well established in Vermont. John was in Newbury as early as 1764 and they married in Haverhill, NH, in 1771. The Ways resided in Peacham before moving to Thetford, where they were modest landowners, and they moved to Barnet in the late 1790s.

The social and economic position of the families suggests that these indentures functioned as a form of guardianship or fostering for the poor children, rather than as a means to get cheap servants. In the case of Abigail Baker in the Way family, the arrangement apparently was satisfactory: She named her first-born son John Baker Way McIndoe, John being the name of both of his grandfathers as well as Abigail's former master.¹⁹ What became of the other indentured children has not been discovered, nor has any information been found about the two oldest children, Lovinia and Samuel. Elizabeth Baker's parents in Strafford or her brothers and sisters in Thetford and Strafford may have taken them in.

The parents, John and Elizabeth Baker, remained a charge on the town of Thetford until their deaths. Bills survive from 1802 and for the next fifteen years for town expenses on behalf of the Bakers.²⁰ The town probably paid bills in the earlier years for which no records exist. There is no evidence that the children were ever required to contribute to the support of their parents, although the 1787 and 1797 poor laws provided for such support. There is also no evidence that Elizabeth Baker's elderly parents, Jonathan and Abigail Rich, were called on for support.

The surviving records cover both general living expenses and medical care. Apparently the Bakers sometimes were boarded and sometimes

lived on their own, for the records contain bills for supplies as well as bills for board. For example:

James Bennett received \$30.62 for boarding Elizabeth for a year from March 1803 to March 1804.

Jacob Newcomb in November 1811 billed the town three dollars "to boarding and Nursing John Baker & family 9 days including Services I did for them while at his house moving him & her and carrying him down to Doc't Allen's," and "\$1 to washing 4 weeks."

Joseph Reed billed the town for codfish, gin, molasses, sugar, rum, one hay rake, flannel, awl and shaft, and tobacco, covering April 1807 to March 1810.

James White billed for a variety of items for March 1809 to June 1812, including: a bushel of corn, 62¢; a quart of salt at 34¢; a bushel of potatoes at 50¢; a pair of shoes at \$2; and a pair of stockings at \$1; plus cloth and sewing services for a coat and pantaloons, services for washing, for nursing Mrs. Baker, and finally for a burying cloth. White's bill came to \$28.96.

There were also bills for washing and baking at 25¢ per day; for making a shirt, 34¢; and "a pair of trowsers," 17¢; for making a frock for Mrs. Baker, 17¢; for thread, soap, and mending, 25¢; and for "Large Stout Thick Shoes," \$2.80. The town also paid for keeping Mr. Baker's cow from 1807 to 1809.

Sometime about 1802 Elizabeth Baker became ill, and the records show increasing medical bills paid by the town. Bills for medicines and visits by Dr. Theodore Hamilton cover thirty-two visits from 1802 to 1808; the total was \$13.63, the usual charge 83 cents to one dollar per house call. Bills of Dr. Joram Allen cover forty-five instances of "visit, medicine, advice" between January 1808 and August 1810 costing the town \$21.45. Medicines included "tinct. digitalis," "—— Peru," "camphorated tinct," "tinct Alooes Comp Gin Ammoniar," "cathartic & Ipir," and "tinct Sand' Canadensis." Beginning in December 1810 the phrases "gin opia" and "tinct opia" appear with regularity. Almost weekly visits from June 1809 to June 1812 cost the town \$29.50, the medicine now described as "tinct opia" or "gum opia." The last payments Thetford citizens made for Elizabeth Baker were in June 1812, "a Coffin for Mrs. Baker \$2.00" and "grave for Mrs. Baker \$1.00."

From November 1811 until 1817 regular bills for room and board were paid, with weekly fees, \$2 per week from November 1811 to June 1812, reduced to \$1 per week after the death of Elizabeth. Among the people being paid were John's brother-in-law, Richard Wallace. From 1812 until mid-1815 John Baker boarded with Aaron Hosmer, and then with Charles Chamberlin. Included in the bills were itemized lists of

clothing and services (a pair of shoes, \$2.00; 6 yards woollen cloth, \$7.50; making one pair of trousers, 50¢; making a coat, \$1.25; a pair of stockings, \$1.00; a pair of leggings, 33¢; etc.). Hosmer's bills were expressed in shillings and pence and then converted to dollars, indicating that although the United States adopted the dollar in 1791 he, and undoubtedly many others, still thought in the old currency. The last invoice found in the file is dated March 14, 1817, when Chamberlin billed for "boarding clothing & lodging John Baker one of the Town's poor a year ending 20th March 1817 \$65," and for "nursing him in sickness," an additional dollar.

For twenty-five years, in an era with no state or federal welfare or veterans' services, the townspeople of Thetford provided services to John Baker and his family, probably with more personal care than a modern bureaucracy would show. The last record of John Baker is this notice which appeared in three successive issues of *Spoooner's Vermont Journal*:

Went away from the subscriber, on Monday the First Day of September ult., JOHN BAKER, a pauper of the town of Thetford, Orange County, Vt. Said Baker is about sixty years old, middling sized, light sandy complexion and hair, and commonly wears a long beard; is frequently delirious, and talks to himself. He had on when he went away a linen tow frock and pantaloons. Whoever will give notice to the subscriber where said Baker can be found will exercise an act of humanity, and shall be handsomely rewarded.

CHARLES CHAMBERLAIN
THETFORD, OCT. 8, 1817²¹

NOTES

¹The author is grateful to Charles Latham, Jr., president of the Thetford Historical Society, for helping locate the many documents in their care, and to the former town clerk of Thetford, Roberta Howard, for help in using the town's vital and land records.

²"An Act Providing for and Ordering Transient, Idle, Impotent, and Poor Persons, March 9, 1787," in John A. Williams, ed., *Laws of Vermont*, in *State Papers of Vermont* (Montpelier, Vt.: Secretary of State, 1966) 14: 290-291.

³*Ibid.*, 292.

⁴"An Act defining what shall be deemed and adjudged a legal settlement; and for the support of the poor, for designating the duties and powers of the overseers of the poor; and for the punishment of idle and disorderly persons," in *Laws of the State of Vermont, Revised and Passed by the Legislature in the year of Our Lord One Thousand Seven hundred and Ninety Seven* (Rutland, 1798), 263.

⁵"An Act Providing for and Ordering Transient, Idle, Impotent and Poor Persons," Williams, ed., *Laws of Vermont*, in *State Papers of Vermont* 14: 295.

⁶These age limits were based on the 1777 Constitution of Vermont, "Chapter 1, Declaration of the Rights of Inhabitants of the State of Vermont," which provided that no male should be held by law to serve any person, as servant, slave, or apprentice, without his consent, after he reached twenty-one years of age, and no female after she reached eighteen. For the Constitution see website: <http://vermont-archives.org/govinfo/constitut/con77.htm>

⁷"An Act defining what shall be deemed and adjudged a legal settlement; and for the support of the poor, for designating the duties and powers of the overseers of the poor; and for the punishment of idle and disorderly persons," in *Laws of the State of Vermont 1797*, 275-276.

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⁸ Charles Latham, Jr., *A Short History of Thetford, Vermont, 1761–1870* (Thetford, Vt.: Thetford Historical Society, 1972), 25.

⁹ Josiah Henry Benton, *Warning Out in New England 1656–1817* (Boston, 1911; reprint, Bowie, Md.: Heritage Books, Inc., 1992), 109, 111, and “An Act Providing for and Ordering Transient, Idle, Impotent and Poor Persons,” Williams, ed., *Laws of Vermont*, in *State Papers of Vermont* 14: 295.

¹⁰ Latham, *A Short History of Thetford*, 22–23.

¹¹ *Rolls and Lists of Connecticut Men in the Revolution, 1775–1783* (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1901) 2: 54, 184, and *Record of Service of Connecticut Men in the I. War of the Revolution, II. War of 1812, III. Mexican War* (Hartford, 1889; reprint Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1997) 149, 155; both reproduced in *Military Records: Connecticut Officers and Soldiers, 1700s–1800s*, Family Tree Maker CD #120, and National Archives, pay and muster records of John Baker of Mansfield, CT; *Town Meeting Records–Deeds*, 1–3: 112, Town Clerk’s Office, Thetford.

¹² *Records of the Church of Christ, Thetford, 1773–1832*, typescript, Thetford Historical Society.

¹³ *Births, Marriages, Deaths*, 1: 47, Town Clerk’s Office, Thetford.

¹⁴ File M34: “Thetford Grand Lists,” Box 1, “1781–1823,” Thetford Historical Society.

¹⁵ File M31: “Thetford Town Papers,” Box 9, “Care of the Poor,” Thetford Historical Society.

¹⁶ Deed recorded 3 January 1802, Thetford *Land Records*, 7: 122–123. Resale, 14 August 1793, was recorded earlier, *Land Records*, 5:102.

¹⁷ File M31: “Thetford Town Papers,” Box 9, “Care of the Poor,” Thetford Historical Society.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Frederick P. Wells, *History of Newbury, Vermont, from the Discovery of the Coös Country to the Present Time* (St. Johnsbury, Vt.: The Caledonian Company, 1902), 628.

²⁰ File M31 “Thetford Town Papers,” Box 9, “Care of the Poor,” Thetford Historical Society. All the information on bills and expenses in the following paragraphs was found in these papers.

²¹ *Spooner’s Vermont Journal*, 20 and 27 October, and 3 November, 1817, microfilm, Vermont State Library.