

# *Collections & Curatorial Internship at the Boutwell House*

*By Kate Guerin, GDRHS*

For the past several weeks, I have been working on several projects as part of my collections and curatorial internship which have been equally challenging and rewarding. My first project, which is currently ongoing, has been to catalogue and sort through documents, dating between the 1760s and the 1830s, pertaining to the poor of Groton, those who were either ill, disabled, aged, widowed, or orphaned.

As the New England area began to grow substantially during early colonial times, settlers established laws originating from England whereby communities were responsible to care for their poor. This outdoor relief was paid for by the town, particularly by the town's Overseers of the Poor. The Groton History Center has many letters and bills in its collections containing records of compensation for the citizens who provided goods, such as necessary food and clothing, or services, such as medical or funeral, to the poor. In many cases, payments were made to other towns for providing for the poor citizens who were officially residents of Groton, (either by birth or marriage,) but resided or drifted through other neighboring towns. Since the rules establishing a vagrant's homeplace were complex, towns would frequently refuse to pay for particular citizens if their residency was questionable. One alternative to this imperfect relief system was indoor relief, by which the poor entered a workhouse or served as an apprentice to a skilled worker.

When I sorted through the first set of papers, I had to decide how I would efficiently organize them in order to make them more easily accessible to visitors. After developing a system that would allow me to catalog the documents and include an appropriate amount of information, I sifted through the papers a second time, trying to decipher the often illegible handwriting. Each time I read a new document, I referred back to the ones I had already catalogued, trying to discover possible connections; many of the letters shared between towns were about the same person while others revealed the person's family connections. Once I had recorded all of the documents in one box, I went back through them, using pH neutral tape to repair tears and labeled all of the sheet protectors with a number corresponding to their entry. The catalog I created is long, but hopefully some of the documents will be useful for our visitors. ■



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