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Stephen J. Meunier
Trinity College

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Stephen J. Meunier

History of Hartford
Department of American Studies
Trinity College

John J. McCook and Social Management in Victorian Age Hartford

On a bright and pleasant morning in 1893 a thin well-dressed man walked down a busy street in Hartford, Connecticut. He wore a conservative suit and close cropped hair, with a beard that suited his roll as a professor at Trinity College. The Hartford streets were busy with industrial commotion; workers came and went, street peddlers sold fruit from their carts, and boys ran about selling newspapers.

This once small New England town had become a hub of industrialization and business. The streets teemed with activity as this man made his way along. Two men were approaching the professor, however they were obviously not of the same type. These men were shabbily dressed, one was white and wore an ill-fitting suit and well-worn shoes, the other was black, with a better fitting suit but also worn, dirty shoes; both men wore bowler hats.

These three men came upon each other on this particular morning, after observing the two men, the well-dressed professor spoke, "Out of work?" he asked. The two men looked at him cautiously and both answered the usual reply: "Yes." The professor continued to question these two men; "Been on the road long?" he asked, "Where do you come from today?" and finally he asked a question they eager responded "Yes" to, "Do you want to earn a quarter today?"

The professor's simple request was that they come with him to have their picture taken and answer some questions. "And it was not long," the professor, John J. McCook, would write eight years later, "before a white 'hobo' and a youthful 'shine' were added to my slowly increasing gallery."¹

Professor John McCook would question these two men for over four hours, referring to the white man as "Connecticut Fatty" and the black man as "Connecticut Fatty's Shine" a "shine" being a "hobo term" for a black man.² Interviewing poor drifters may seem like an unusual hobby for a man like John J. McCook, who was not only a Professor of Modern Languages at Trinity but also an Episcopal minister at a parish in East Hartford. However, starting around 1890 McCook had become almost obsessively interested in studying the causes and possible solutions for the growing "tramp" population in his city of Hartford and, eventually, throughout the United States.

The rise of industrialization in the United States, especially in the Northeast, had created a large class of transient workers. These men, commonly referred to as "tramps" or "hobos," would travel on the growing railroad lines from city to city. They would go where there was work: cutting firewood in the fall and winter in New England, picking fruit in the spring down south, they performed jobs that were irregular and often seasonal. Many were mechanics, traveling around performing odd jobs, fixing this or that for a farmer or shop owner around the country.

¹ This small sketch is based on John McCook's writings. This scene is described in part one of a nine part series McCook wrote for the magazine, "The Independent" called "Leaves from the Diary of a Tramp" written in 1901-1902. The appearance of the two "hobos" is from the pictures included in this article, the appearance of John McCook I based on a 1896 picture taken by William T. Walker, a Trinity College student, found at Connecticut History OnLine.

² I will try and explain the terms used in "hobo language." I will not over-use these terms, as they are often used to portray the supposed romance of the life of a tramp. However, if the language is relevant to my research I will use the terms and describe their meaning as best I can. This will be done using the "Glossary of the Road" in Roger A. Bruns book, "Knights of the Road: A Hobo History."

Most of these men had been employed in a factory or industrial setting at one point, and following an economic downturn or change in industry, been put out-of-work. Hartford was often on the route of these workers, some were local men who stayed in town and performed jobs where they could get them, but many were simply stopping on their way from Boston to New York. Some would stay to work, perhaps on the construction of the West Hartford reservoir or other manual labor jobs. Some would only stay a night or two, sleeping down along the banks of the Connecticut River in the “bull barn,” a barn along the river known for always being unlocked and providing a warm nights sleep and the company of other tramps.

Following the Civil War American society was transformed on both a massive scale and in the smallest details of everyday life. Alan Trachtenberg details this reorganization of society in his book, *The Incorporation of America*. Industrialization reshaped American society in a more organized, ordered, and definable terms. Trachtenberg describes these changes as “the emergence of a changed, more tightly structured society with new hierarchies of control.”³

Cities were growing and becoming more urban in scope, the mixture of agriculture and livestock among city streets were being replaced with the new characteristics of modern urban life. Tenement buildings and early apartment buildings were ordering the lower classes into pre-ordained sections of the city, and in homes designed and built to house their specific economic and social class. For example, in Hartford “perfect six” apartment buildings surrounded the industrial center of Capitol

³ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (Hill and Wang: New York, 1982) 3-4.

Avenue in what is today the Frog Hollow section of town. These apartments allowed workers to walk to work at the various factories along Capitol Avenue.

Transportation was providing the hard-luck citizen of the rural out-skirts a way to move into a city with better job prospects. Streets and burgeoning public transportation were redesigning the look and function of the city. The need to leave the city outside of personal pleasure was nearly eliminated. No longer were families providing their own products, anything they needed was available at a local store. Services once performed by most people were being confined to a few “professionals,” such as: manufacturing clothing, tools, and particularly, food.

The genesis of these social changes, and indeed its defining character, was industrialization. The rapid growth and prosperity of industrialization transformed American society. In all aspects, politics, labor, economics and social classes, America was organizing around the development of the industrial model. Arguably, the most widespread change to society as a whole was the shift from a large population of self-supporting agricultural communities to a population consisting of wage-earning employees, dependent on industry as a financial source.⁴

At times of economic recession or depression these industries couldn't support the large pool of workers it needed during economic boom years, and the result was a new American characteristic; widespread unemployment.

Workers trained to serve a specific function within the industrial system couldn't easily adapt to other means of survival. Often times they were generations away from their agricultural past and did not have the land or know-how to produce food.

⁴ Alexander Keyssar, *Out of Work: The First Century of Unemployment in Massachusetts* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, London, New York, 1986) 16.

The result was a population of transient workers, or tramps. This new population of poverty stricken workers, or out-of-workers, was an affront to the ideals and characteristics of the Victorian Age middle or upper classes. These classes defined themselves by the new organization of society, often times the reorganization of society by industrialization provided the means for their rise to upper class superiority. A large transient population did not fit into an organized society, to appease Victorian ideals, this population had to be defined, explained and finally, organized.

This is the focus of my paper, the work of John J. McCook represents what Steven Conn called the “Victorian rage for order.”⁵ The Victorian era upper class, of which John McCook was a part, viewed society as it viewed all aspects of life, with “rational, orderly, systematic ideals.”⁶ It was an attempt to separate this population from the self-supporting upper classes, and define its characteristics and causes, and finally organize it within society providing the least amount of burden on the self-supporting upper classes. In other words, what I will call “social management.”

Furthermore, I will assert that John McCook’s career is demonstrative of not only a larger Victorian ideal for order, but also an expression of a “nativist anxiety.” The massive wave of immigration caused by the demand for cheap labor in the industries became an affront on the native citizens of New England towns and cities. The immigrants were “foreign” in all aspects, language, manors, religions and social habits. These differences often created fear in native citizens that felt their world was quickly disappearing, which of course, it was.

⁵ Steven Conn, *Museums in American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926*, (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1998) 8.

⁶ Ibid.

My thesis is that the dual influences of the Victorian desire for order and the native anxiety felt among the Yankee classes framed McCook's views of the growing tramp population in Hartford. McCook's views translated into his writings and specifically in his recommendations in the 1891 Poor Laws report. His solution to limit any and all aid for paupers to the auspices of the town's Alms House is a result of both a desire for order and a fear of modern urban realities.

By utilizing an order and control of these new additions to the population the native citizens could still maintain their old order. The irony is that the main focus of John McCook's poverty studies are often native men, however they had been uprooted and suffered from industrial age woes, namely unemployment and alcoholism.

John McCook never expresses any feelings, such as the "know-nothings," about ethnic inferiority or racism. It is moral failings and growing dependency of the lower rungs of society that John McCook wishes to define, explain, organize and eventually reform. McCook often used negative racial or social characteristics in his writing; however, my point is that his desire to restructure poor laws is not racially or ethnically motivated.

John J. McCook attempted to define this population, referring to it as the "peripatetic aristocracy"⁷ By organizing them into an ordered hierarchy; from "shovel bums" or migrant workers, (often mechanics) from the hopeless drunks (though in McCook's view, most social ills found their origin in drink) McCook tried to explain this vagrant population in any terms other than a result of economic downturns and industrial

⁷ "peripatetic" meaning itinerant and moving, I understand McCook's term "peripatetic aristocracy" as a hierarchy of transient men.

age dependence, even employing a Trinity College chemist to test the chemical properties of the whiskey they drank.

John McCook often sought to frame public policy to help separate this population from the views and lives of productive society. This will be the main argument of my paper, that McCook's views manifested in public policy intending to separate confine and organize tramps into a Victorian ideal of society. This was most evident in McCook's first major involvement with poverty reform; the 1891 "Report of The Special Committee of Outdoor Alms of the Town of Hartford."

It was McCook's involvement with the investigation into the Poor Laws in Hartford, and particularly his outrage at the money spent by Hartford, that started an over thirty year obsession with poverty studies.

I will focus on the 1891 report in this paper; however, to better illustrate McCook's views I will use examples from other articles he wrote. For the sake of accuracy I will try and confine my outside example to within 10 years from when the report was written. The 1890s represents McCook's most active and influential period of study.

I believe by examining not only John McCook's views evident in this report, but also how he states his opinions, specifically vocabulary he uses, McCook was not only expressing a desire to manage this aspect of society, but to a degree, creating contempt for the supposed burden this part of society places on the self-supporting upper classes.

I will be presenting a brief scholarly argument as to the causes of tramps and widespread unemployment, mostly summarized from Alexander Keyssar's book, *Out of Work: The First Century of Unemployment in Massachusetts*. However, I wish to make

clear this is not a paper examining the *actual*⁸ causes of tramps in the Victorian age, but McCook's opinions as to the causes and solutions of industrial poverty, and the Victorian ideals his opinions reflected.

A Changing Hartford: Industrialization, Immigration and the Yankee Reaction

In 1888, Elijah Adams, a successful Massachusetts businessman, looked back on a lifetime of work and wrote a book titled, *A Retrospect of Activities in Seven Cities and Seven Decades*. Adams recalled his experience, both personal and business, in seven New England Cities. Elijah Adams writes of Hartford, "The Hartford of to-day is wonderfully changed from what it was forty years ago, when I first located there, and it will only be possible to mention the most remarkable improvements."⁹

Elijah Adams continues to praise the progress in Hartford; mud streets had been paved, bridges "of fine quality" abound, there are many beautiful parks, and a growing insurance business that "is an honor to the city."

While admiring the many physical changes in the city, notably the construction of the new "handsome state house," Adams notes, "It is in the manufacturing line that Hartford surpasses." He goes on to praise companies such as the Jewell Belting Company

⁸ By "actual" I mean economic, social, and other reasons that have been documented in decades of industrial and social history research. There is seemingly limitless research into this aspect of our history, mostly dealing with the depression, but finding its origins in the industrial revolution of the late 19th century.

⁹ Nelson Adams, *The Elijah Adams Family of Hubbardston, Mass. And A Retrospective of Activities in Seven Cities and Seven Decades*, Published by the Author in Springfield, Mass., 1910.

and other “solid firms.” Adams notes “Colt’s firearms have spread the fame of the city all over the globe.”¹⁰

Elijah Adams bought into a small company along the banks “of a small river which flows through West Hartford.” Adams, like countless other industrious New Englanders were involved in small-scale industries that filled in the space between larger firms like Colt. In this case, Elijah Adams bought into a firm that had machinery and appliances for rendering “bone, tallow and similar products” into fertilizer. Elijah Adams is demonstrative of the massive scope of industrialization; outside of large companies, many, if not most, people around cities were involved in industrialization.

Peter Temin, states quite succinctly; “In 1830, Most New Englanders lived on farms and grew much of the food they ate. By 1880, most New Englanders lived in cities, worked for wages, and bought their food.”¹¹ The reasons for this are complicated and multi-faceted, books have been written solely about the economic reasons for industrialization, the social framework that made it possible, and about every other academic discipline that is needed to explain this massive change.

Industrialization in the late 1800s is arguably the most significant development in the history of the United States. The evolution of the American character and landscape in the last half of the 19th century made the “American Century” possible. Simply put, America as a nation could not have undertaken any of the monumental achievements of the 20th century without the changes initiated by industrialization.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Peter Temin, “The Industrialization of New England, 1830-1880” found in *Engines of Enterprise: An Economic History of New England*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2000)109.

The reasons for industrialization in New England is a blend of varying factors: the natural landscape provided many rivers to dam for waterpower, abundance of available workers, creative financial developments such as joint-stock companies, ingenious use of tariffs to balance English imports and allow American products to thrive, and the Puritan work-ethic that as a religious and cultural entity promoted hard work and self-reliance.¹²

All of the factors that promoted industrialization were in place in Hartford. The town of Hartford was among the first establishments in Connecticut, and in fact Western New England. A tradition of community and government was well in place by the 1800s that could support a growth in capital and population. The natural resources were in place for development; Hartford was on the Connecticut River, which could be used for transportation to the Long Island Sound and therefor, large ocean ports such as New York. The smaller Park River ran through town allowing mills to develop along the interior of Hartford. As well as a convenient method of removing industrial and personal waste to the Connecticut River.

Industry began to flourish in Hartford, mostly revolving around Samuel Colt's armory, other precision machine shops, and a growing financial services sector. Like many other New England cities, Hartford developed a varied industrial landscape, work was available for the most unskilled laborer and for those in the educated elite, and with transportation still scarce, all these communities lived relatively close together.

As the workforce in Hartford became increasingly more foreign, namely Irish, the native stock in town started to take action to preserve "their town." The native reaction to immigrant influx caused several changes in the urban landscape. A segregated city started

¹² Taking from both Peter Temin and Margaret Ellen Newell's essay, "The Birth of New England in the Atlantic Economy: From Its beginning to 1770" found in *Engines of Enterprise*,

to form; the idea that certain neighborhoods were for certain people became the dominant theme in urban development.

Peter Baldwin writes about the segregation of city space in his book *Domesticating the Street: The Reform of Public Space in Hartford, 1850-1930*. Baldwin traces the origins of this segregation to the building of a central park advocated by Horace Bushnell, later named Bushnell Park. Horace Bushnell had idyllic reasoning for his park; a public space that could reunite a quickly polarizing community. The park could serve as a natural meeting place for all members of society, and add a peaceful, natural tranquility to the urban landscape.

Ironically, the idea of redeveloping public space became the method for initiating the opposite of Bushnell's unifying vision. The notion of segregated space began to "serve the interests of affluent people seeking to buffer themselves from urban unpleasantness."¹³ The Protestant middle and upper class viewed the idea of segregating society as a means of dealing with the swelling immigrant communities. In other words, the "urban unpleasantness" Baldwin speaks of isn't necessarily factories and industry, but rather the poor, ethnic and Catholic workers.

Peter Baldwin writes that the division of the city along the lines of socio-economic status provided a pacifying service. The native Yankees "unabashedly welcomed the idea of segregating public space, viewing it not as a necessary antidote to the morally troublesome division in society,"¹⁴ as had been Horace Bushnell's original urban vision, "but as a welcome extension of the logic represented by new middle-class

¹³ Peter C. Baldwin, *Domesticating the Street: The Reform of Public Space in Hartford, 1850-1930* (Ohio State University Press: Columbia, Ohio, 1999) 33.

¹⁴ Ibid.

neighborhoods.” The Protestant Yankees “came to view segregation as the model for a pluralistic society: divided but at peace.”¹⁵

It was into this social structure that the John J. McCook was approached to prepare a report on the Poor Laws in Hartford. It should be noted, John McCook had no formal training or experience with public policy or the social sciences. His “expertise” in this area came solely from personal interest and investigation, that being said, McCook committed more time, energy and thought to issues of poverty than anyone else in Hartford at the time.

John J. McCook and Hartford’s Poor Laws

“There is a species of crab, so the naturalist tell us, which comes into the world with all the organs of his kind fully developed. Presently he fastens himself upon a fish and begins to draw life from it. And now by degrees he parts with one organ after another, until finally he has nothing left in active use except mouth and stomach and apparatus for reproduction and for holding on. Such is the professional pauper.” *John J. McCook, 1891*

John James McCook was born in New Lisbon, Ohio in 1843.¹⁶ His family had originally been from Connecticut, and upon return to Hartford, McCook would live in his

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ My brief biographical sketch of John McCook is based primarily on the biography and chronology from the “Social Reform Papers of John J. McCook” 14 microfilms owned by the *Antiquarian and Landmarks Society*. The microfilm’s I used are held at the library at Trinity College. The biographical sketch, microfilm guide, and timeline of McCook’s life are found at the beginning of each roll.

wife's family house on Main Street. The McCook family was a distinguished and respected family, certainly among the social, if not financial, elite.

The family earned the name "The Fighting McCooks" as his father, four brothers, uncle and eight cousins served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Although, John McCook's contribution to the name was merely a few months in the Virginia Volunteer Regiment.

He soon left the military life to study at Trinity College in Hartford, rooming with his aunt and orphaned cousin, Eliza Butler, at the family house on Main Street. He would later marry Eliza and raise eight children at the house, owned today by the Antiquarian and Landmarks Society and run as the Butler-McCook House, the oldest house in Hartford.

After graduating from Trinity in 1863, John McCook briefly studied medicine at Columbia University, before leaving to prepare for the ministry. In 1866, McCook was ordained a deacon in the Episcopal Church. After traveling in Europe and serving at a church in Detroit, John McCook returned to Connecticut and became the rector at St. John's Church in East Hartford.

John McCook would stay in Hartford to raise his family, and after tutoring at his old college, joined the faculty at Trinity as an instructor of Latin, and eventually as a Professor of Modern Languages. John McCook's activities in the 1880s was standard of a young professor; he actively participated in fund-raising, including the new Gymnasium and Alumni building at Trinity, his family increased in size, and at the close of the decade was appointed head of the Modern Languages department.

At a town meeting in 1890 John McCook publicly objected to the amount of money Hartford was spending on “aid to paupers.” After the meeting McCook was appointed chairman of a committee to investigate the amount of spending on alms and to compile a report. A committee of five men submitted the report, however, when it was finished the “other members of the committee credited [the report] solely to McCook.”¹⁷

The primary objection, in McCook’s view, is the amount of spending on “outdoor alms.” This can be understood as spending used outside of the town's Alms House, McCook describes the most “accurate and scientific” explanation as “all persons helped without leaving their homes.”¹⁸ The outlets for outdoor alms discussed in the report are: temporary financial help, such as money for food, care of sick, rent, burial of the dead, hospitals, the insane, and orphans.¹⁹

John McCook’s objection, and apparently a shared opinion, in 1890 was simply the extraordinary amount of money Hartford was spending on aid when compared to other communities. To illustrate this point, McCook compares Hartford with five other Connecticut towns, then five Massachusetts towns, then New England, then the South, the West, and finally ending on “France, parts of the German Empire, the Scandinavian peninsula and Great Britain.”²⁰ It can’t be said that John McCook lacked a flair for really making a point when he wanted to make a point.

¹⁷ Ibid., Biography, 2.

¹⁸ John J. McCook, “Report of The Special Committee on Outdoor Alms of the Town of Hartford, A.D. 1891” found in *The Social Reform Paper of John J. McCook* roll, 9ix. Hereafter referred to as “Report on Outdoor Alms, 1891”

¹⁹ I am using the vocabulary of the report in this paper. I normally would not describe people as “the insane” or other terms used, however, I will use them throughout the paper, these are the terms used to describe whole groups of people, and I feel it is important to use the original terms rather than modern politically correct substitutes, so forgive my insensitivity.

²⁰ Report on Outdoor Alms, 1891, pages vi-viii

In short, the findings demonstrate that Hartford is paying more for poor relief than the entire civilized world. In 1885 Hartford paid an average of \$2.07 per individual in poor relief compared with an average of \$1.22 in other Connecticut cities. When compared to Massachusetts, the gap widens as the Bay State paid an average of \$1.16 per person in aid. In New York the average recipient of poverty relief received only an average of 63 cents per person, which is still more than those in Pennsylvania and Maryland whom received an average of 38 cents compared with Hartford's \$2.07.

As McCook states, "Connecticut was found leading the van, and Hartford leading Connecticut." To present a fuller picture, McCook looked across the Atlantic in hopes that "communities across the ocean would present a different showing and vindicate us!" Alas, the spending in Europe would not vindicate Hartford's tax-paying citizens.

In 1890 Hartford trimmed its spending to an average of \$1.96 per person, however still ahead of the German "Teutonic communities" including, Dresden, Berlin and Stuttgart, whom pay an average of \$1.31 against Hartford's \$1.96. McCook notes even in the largest cities of the continent, Hartford still comes out ahead. "Paris and London, with their great congestion of population and poverty, can do much to humiliate us, but not in everything! In outdoor relief, with which this report is specially concerned we lead them with out 74 cents per head as against their 71."²¹

Finally, however, there seems to be hope of some governing body in the entire world that pays more than Hartford, and it turns out it is Italy. McCook states, "But surely we shall find some comfort when we turn to Italy!—and so it turns out." The Italian people spend an average of \$3.42 to Hartford's \$1.96. However, by stating the Italy

²¹ Ibid.

spends more for poverty relief only reinforces McCook's view, as a growing number of immigrants in Hartford in 1890 are Italian.

John McCook ends the opening of his report, which compares Hartford with other cities, by stating, "So then, the situation was beyond doubt. Hartford was leading the old world as well as the new!" There are many possible reasons for the divergence in the data John McCook presents in this report. The gathering, sources and definitions of what cities considered poverty relief may have contributed to the astonishing numbers McCook's report documents. However, it is safe to say that Hartford was paying an unusually large amount of poverty relief.

While I do not find the comparisons of Hartford with London or Dresden a sound argument, when compared to similar industrializing cities in Connecticut and New England, Hartford is spending a noticeably larger sum of money on poverty relief. When put into perspective with a city such as New Haven with a population of 76, 000 compared with Hartford's 45, 000 in 1885, Hartford's additional 2,000 Gross spending on Outdoor relief is clearly bothersome.²²

McCook suggests within the report that "It may be that we have been helping only proper persons in a proper way, if so, our prominence herein is but an additional distinction." If the recipients of this massive amount of aid are deserving poor who use the help to better their lot in life, than it is money well spent. "For," McCook writes, "we are all of one mind when it is question of timely aid to unfortunate and deserving

²² The Report on Outdoor Alms, Table 1, "Hartford Compared With 38 American Cities." The data reports that Hartford is paying a Gross Expense of 40,372.84 compared to New Haven's 38,906.75.

members of our community. The limit of a town's ability to give is in that case the sole limit of its duty."²³

It is interesting that McCook's objection is not solely the amount of money spent on poor relief, but whether the recipients are "deserving members of *our community*." (italics added) The definition of "our community" is not explained further, but throughout the report terms like "our town" and "our community" are used.

It is impossible to suppose whom McCook was thinking of when he used these terms, however there is no question who the report was being written for: the city government. The report would be read by leading citizens and decision maker in Hartford, who, like McCook, were members of the social or financial elite. It is common for members of the Protestant upper class to use possessive phrases in reference to towns or cities in the late 1800s. This occurred simply because before industrialization there was no need to differentiate between "the town" and "our town:" they were the same thing.

In 1890 the amount of aid to the poor was determined by the existing Poor Laws in Hartford. The existing law stated that, "All persons who have not estate sufficient for their support and have no relations of sufficient ability who are obliged by law to support them, shall be provided for and supported at the expense of the town where they belong; and every town shall maintain and support all the poor inhabitants belonging to it."²⁴

The failing of this law, in McCook's view, is the definition of "poor." He states that while the French have two terms for "poor" that "come within the operations of their laws;" necessitous and indigent. These terms determine whether temporary or permanent

²³ Ibid, x-xi.

²⁴ Ibid, xi.

help is needed. “We,” McCook writes, “have but one word—poor.” To McCook’s Victorian ideals, simply defining the terms used will provided massive changes to the administration of the poor laws.²⁵

Not only was John McCook intent on defining the term “poor” he will use these terms as a science, not open to interpretation. Determining if a person or family is “poor” is a “question of fact, not of sentiment.” If liberal use of the word “poor” is used, causing increased financial recipients; the result will be “utter demoralization and disorganization of society.”²⁶

Furthermore, McCook reminds the reader that this report is not to be sentimentalized or understood as anything but public policy, “it must be distinctly understood that we have been dealing with a system and not with individuals or any individual.”²⁷ Of course, one must only read the report to recognize that the majority of McCook’s argument is based on examples of individuals receiving aid from Hartford.

It becomes clear at the outset of McCook’s writing that he is speaking to issues beyond fiscal restraint and public policy. John McCook, as other white native citizens, saw the world changing around him. From his Colonial house on Main Street, McCook was in plain view of the East Side, or the “immigrant section” of Hartford. The neighborhood east of Main Street running along the banks of the Connecticut River was the center of the new element in town.

The East Side was where the source of what Baldwin called, “urban unpleasantness.” The streets were lined with dilapidated tenement buildings, saloons, and brothels. As Peter Baldwin states, “the East Side served as Hartford’s skid row and red-

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, xii.

light district.”²⁸ Of this neighborhood, McCook wrote, “How long can you be in the neighborhood of the corner of Front and State without seeing at least one drunkard?”²⁹

From his perch on Main Street, John McCook could view before him the growing moral degradation of the modern city. The main vice among this element of society was the abuse of alcohol. McCook said of drunks, “I have counted a dozen within a few minutes—staggering along from saloon to saloon, dropping in half helplessness upon the steps to fall into a drunken torpor.”³⁰

The Professional Pauper

“People work because they think they must in order to live. When they find, by any accident, that they can get on without it, they cheerfully resign themselves. Men lose their jobs from sickness or hard times and find themselves launched out into the world with no savings, or with a hoard which diminishes rapidly for food, lodging, licentiousness, the theatre, oftener for drink. By chance, by precept, no matter how, but nearly always through mushy, soft hearted kindness, or ill judged, misdirected charity, they make the discovery that they can get enough to eat and drink and wear and even to gratify the still grosser animal instincts, together with a tolerable shelter for the night, though doing nothing, or nothing more than odd jobs.”
John J. McCook, 1895

The seemingly ever-growing community of tramps and poor citizens was the fear and anxiety that drove McCook and others to feel action necessary to protect “our town.” The laws in 1891 were not only spoiling unworthy people, but also “schooling,” the children “in pauperism.” McCook wrote the above statements in an article in 1895 published in a Trinity College paper.

²⁷ Ibid, lxii.

²⁸ Peter Baldwin, *Domesticating the Street*, 44.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

McCook argues that the poor lot in life many people suffer from is caused by laziness and personal failings, not outside forces. Furthermore, the perception of the sublime slothful life of a tramp will cause others to revert to these ways and placing a greater burden on the rest of society.

John McCook wrote an article in 1895 for *The Trinity Tablet* that spoke of the danger of allowing tramps to live happily as tramps. The lifestyle reflected a freedom that was rare in industrialized America, McCook quoted a tramp as saying, “There are really only two happy men in the world,’ said a bright, healthy looking vagabond to me one day, ‘the tramp and the millionaire.” Stating these sentiments more poetically, McCook states, “Even a canary bird, with an endless line of caged ancestry, will fly out, if it gets the chance,” despite the impossibility of “prolonged existence.”³¹

Like the canary bird, “man is like his brother animals. He is pretty well broken in at present, but he still wants to break out now and then. A picnic or a short outing suffices under normal circumstances.” The desire to revert to a life of shiftless freedom must be snuffed out, as “their example is infectious.”³²

To prove his point, John McCook compares tramps with Native Americans, or “recently converted savages.” To shed light on the tramp problems, McCook wrote letters to men “familiar with Indian character and life.” This included clergy whom worked in missionaries and military officers whom have come into contact with Indians.

These men all declared success in civilizing some Indians into schools and away from the “old ways.” However, they found during the spring many “feel the impulse very strongly to break away from their new pursuits and go back to the old.” The “old ways”

³¹ John J. McCook, *Vagabondag: What Accounts For It?* The Trinity Tablet, June 25, 1895, 278. Found on Roll 7.

are described as “Maple sugar making...fishing...hunting...a perfect idyl!” It is the memories of these ways that “make the mouth of the subjugated savage in the cities water.”

The desire to “do as their ancestors had always done.” A “pathetic” example of this spring fever is given as “the little Indian boys and girls flattening their noses against the window panes as the time for these occupations sets in.” McCook notes his own observations with “re-civilized tramps” as “this old longing for the barbaric life. And it comes usually in Spring and is frequently all but irresistible.”

Indeed, McCook wrote, “I was lately a witness to one of the ‘joys’ of this sort of life.” He describes a visit to the banks of the river where the “bull barn” is located. The bull barn was “known far and wide to trampdom for its unparalleled attractions, being ample of dimension, commonly well furnished with hay and always wide open.” This particular visit was during a nighttime gathering of tramps and “local laboring men from the city out for a little fun.”³³

The party was a group of men gathered around a stew pot and a “beer keg, empty when I arrived.” The “host” of the party was an Irish Protestant and former British soldier whom performed his old marches despite, “frequent lapses from perfect verticality” caused by “artificial anaesthesia.”

The evening continued with men sitting around the fire, drinking beer and occasional belts of whiskey. When the stew of “broth of beef, carrots, potatoes and onions” was finished it was “ladled out into dishes and cans with the most exemplary unselfishness. The men passed away the night singing songs and telling stories, like true”

³² Outdoor Alms Report, 1891, ix-x.

³³ Ibid, 275.

children of nature.” Generally speaking, not carrying on in any particular morally reprehensible fashion.

John McCook states that it is not in man’s nature to work, we do so we can live. He sites examples of people whom have a “mania for work,” however, McCook adds, “such people are probably abnormal.” The average person, “like his brother the beast, has to be trained to work.” These men carrying on at the bull barn just need to be drawn back in to civilization and re-trained how to work.

Under the current system however, this will not happen because of what McCook calls the “Quadrilateral of Vagabondage.” Which is:

1. Prodigality in flush times
2. Foolish charity.
3. Legal stimulation of chronic misdemeanor
4. Toleration of the drink nuisance.

To ween the tramps away from the directionless life *and* curtail excessive spending that burdens society, they must be trained, or re-trained to work. Like McCook’s other examples this system works: Indians must be removed to reservations and the canary must be kept in its cage. In the case of tramps, any aid or financial support should be administered solely under the auspices of the city’s Alms House.

Under One Roof: The Alms House as Social Control

“Huckleberry—Why don’t you try to behave?” Then she told me all about the bad place, and I said I wished I was there. She got mad then, but I didn’t mean no harm. All I wanted was to go somewheres; all I wanted was a change,”

“But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before.” Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

One can’t help but compare the industrial age freedom represented by tramps with the famous character of Hartford’s own Sam Clemens. The character of Huckleberry Finn is the embodiment of the desire to reject civilization and live outside of the confines of modern America. Like Huck and Jim floating down the Mississippi the tramps rode the rails around America, living the freedom of the millionaire.

The natural reaction to this seemingly aimlessness is to act as Aunt Sally did, to “sivilize.” It wasn’t merely the “cost” of aiding the poor that drove McCook to dedicate 30 years to social reform, it was also fear of a rejection of civilization. (Although, as a good social conservative, cost was an effective carrot leading him) But, like Aunt Sally’s fear of Huck being condemned to “the bad place” McCook feared the poor members of society intentionally “leaving” civilization, which we can understand to mean: work, temperance, religion and social and self-responsibility.

The best method of re-civilization in McCook’s view, while providing the least amount of burden on the community, was the Alms House. Hartford had an Alms House at the time of the 1891 report, but it was being overshadowed by the “extravagance” being afforded by the Outdoor Alms system.

At the time of the 1891 report Hartford’s Alms House was far from the ideal solution for the city’s tramp problem. As McCook notes the house was used by drunks

and beggars to rest, heal, clean up, and generally become stronger to continue their lives of debauchers, it was “a vicious circle.”³⁴

McCook studies the current spending and residents of the Alms House prior to his 1891 report. The results are akin to the Outdoor Alms, wasteful, misdirected, and only aiding pauperism. “Are we protecting society against them?” McCook asks about the tramps in the Alms House, “Yes, during the periods of their detention. But, thereafter, with the regularity of the seasons, they disgust and demoralize, sometimes terrify, society by a debauch, or an orgy, the more energetic and scandalous for the nursing we have given them.”³⁵

At present, McCook saw the Alms House as providing a warm, comfortable resting oasis for haggard drunks and tramps. The clothes and supplies given to these people at the Alms House would be pawned soon after their departure, to no doubt help them return to the life of debauchery. This is a sentiment McCook states frequently, money should not be given to vagrants unless they have been completely re-civilized. “The person who will give any beggar a coin,” McCook would state at the end of many reports, “just because it seems too hard to refuse him, ought on similar grounds to give razors and guns to madmen and children.”³⁶

The solution is, as McCook states in other sections of the report, find out “where people belong.” An examination of the current occupants of the Alms House revealed a

³⁴ Report on Outdoor Alms, 1891, xivi.

³⁵ Ibid, liii.

³⁶ Found in both, “Tramps.” *Report of the Proceedings of the International Congress of Charities, Correction and Philanthropy* (Chicago, June 1893, Editor, John H. Finley, found on page 107) and “Tramps” *The Charities Review* III, no. 2 (December 1893, found on page 69)

crowd of “ex-criminals, many of whom belong in jail or house of corrections, and with whom self-respecting poor persons should not be compelled to associate.”³⁷

Until these scoundrels and criminals are removed and placed in jail “where they belong” the Alms House will not serve as the necessary antidote to the city’s social ills. It is in the Alms House that McCook sees the financial and social relief from the burden placed on the taxpayers. However, “until you remove such from the almshouse you have no right to say to the 70 or 80 persons now assisted at their homes, but who ought, under a strict interpretation of the law, to be in the almshouse, ‘go there, or else do without help!’”³⁸

McCook cites several reasons for the benefits of providing aid by the Alms House. The chief among these reasons being, “Now it is plainly far more economical to support a number under one roof than the same number scattered hither and thither.” However, I maintain that the reasons have far more social benefits than economical conveniences.

If persons receiving aid are held “under one roof” than the “persons thus supported are under steady inspection.” As a result, these people use the aid “not for luxuries, not for crime, but for the decent necessities of life.”(xiv) This is, in essence, a form of social control, using the hand of charity to in turn hold the poor in constant check. McCook wishes to use the enticement of help to re-train the poor into productive members of society.

McCook believes that when “it is a question of leaving home and friends for a strange building and unknown, possibly disagreeable associates, with the stigma of

³⁷ Outdoor Alms Report, 1891, ix.

³⁸ Ibid, lvii.

pauperism openly attached, many a person will recoil.” These people, when faced with the “stigma of pauperism” will be forced to return to or seek out a life of self-support. “The instinct of self-help,” McCook writes, “dormant for the moment, will be stimulated to new activity...and thereby the community will be saved a burden”³⁹

Moreover, “the refusal to help” McCook continues, “except at the almshouse will serve as a deterrent to applications for help.” What McCook is creating with this system is essentially a social funnel. At the top are all persons in want or need of help, as they continue through the funnel many people will be discouraged or their dormant instincts will be activated. What pours out of the bottom are the dregs, those that absolutely need support to live, and these people will be placed in the Alms House.

I believe McCook views the Alms House with the same beneficial qualities of the reservations for the “recently converted savages” out west. These people need to be taken out of their environment, where the temptations of drink and laziness exist, and be re-trained into civilized life.

This system reflects the ordered simplicity of McCook’s Victorian ideals. The urban order will be simplified; criminals belong in jail, poor in need of help will be in the Alms House, and the rest of the self-supporting community will thrive unburdened by social ills.

This also reflects, I believe, the native or Yankee anxiety. In a worse case situation, if the tramps and beggars can’t be re-trained into civilized life, they will at least be “under steady inspection.” This is Baldwin’s notions of segregated space in the modern city; divided, but at peace.

³⁹ Ibid, xiv.

As detailed in this paper John McCook was far from a sympathetic observer of the “tramp problem” in Hartford. Much of his language seems to breed contempt for the lower rungs of society. However, it cannot be argued that he did not make a large effort to do something to create a better social system that will benefit the poor and leave the rest of society unburdened by them.

The issues surrounding tramps is far more complicated than what is covered in this small paper. Much of John McCook’s work dealt with two major subgroups of the tramp problem: alcoholism and venal voting. Both of these issues contribute to what I have been refereeing to as native or Yankee anxiety.

Intemperance, in McCook’s views, is the root cause for the perceived decay of this social group. “The question of alms here in Hartford,” McCook states in his concluding remarks in the 1891 report, “is largely the question of drink.” Abuse of alcohol is the overriding issue in the cause and eventual solution to the “tramp problem.” Certainly other issues are central, such as unemployment, but drinking is the catalyst for debauchery and abuse of the alms system.

The issue of venal voting potentially poses the biggest threat to the Yankee political system. McCook cites one example of a tramp who, “had voted eight times on one single election day in New York city, receiving therefor a total of sixteen dollars.”⁴⁰ This issue is dealt with at some length by McCook and plays an important role in forming his views on the potentially critical affect the tramp problem could have on civilized society.

All of these issues, which I will examine in a Master’s Thesis project, contributed to McCook’s desire to create and implement control into the perceived chaotic new urban

environment. To John McCook the “tramp” represents the worst aspects of society: alcoholism, laziness, aimlessness, fraud and wastefulness. To “re-civilize” tramps would be a way to address these larger social problems, in other words, to control the disease by limiting how it is spread.

The world John McCook and his fellow Yankee upper-class citizens fondly remembered was gone forever in Hartford. Like much of New England, and indeed America, a new industrial order was reshaping how society was structured. It was during this time of social restructuring that McCook tried to implement beneficial controls and limitations to lessen the impact this restructuring had on the traditional Yankee society.

In reference to this era of change Alan Trachtenberg writes, “On the threshold of a process that would transform America and a good part of the world, the Gilded Age marked a watershed of clashing perspective and practices.”⁴¹ The perspectives and practices of John J. McCook were neither defining nor significantly unique for this time-period, they were however indicative of prevalent beliefs held by like-minded Yankee citizens in Hartford.

In the large view of Industrial Age history John McCook barely registers in the established lexicon of names and events. In Hartford history he plays a minor role, his influence in public policy was more reflective than instructive. Indeed, even in Trinity College history he is cited as an ardent fund-raiser and has the dubious honor of having the most aesthetically unpleasant building on campus named for him.

⁴⁰ “Tramps,” 99.

⁴¹ Trachtenberg, 5.

However, it is this seemingly “ordinary” status that makes his volumes of written material illuminating and indicative of the prevalent views of the Yankee establishment in Hartford at a time of great change.