

Associated Charities of Worcester, Massachusetts

The Associated Charities of Worcester was one of many, similarly named private charitable organizations that emerged in cities across the United States in the late-19th century. Associated Charities implemented what became known as "scientific" charity, a new approach and attitude toward private poor relief that was articulated in publications like S. Humphreys Gurteen's *A Handbook of Charity Organization* (1882) and Josephine Shaw Lowell's *Public Relief and Private Charity* (1884).

Prior to the scientific charity movement, private charities established for relief of the poor were, characteristically, locally based and unconnected organizations run by religiously motivated, female volunteers. In contrast, the new "scientific" charities came increasingly under the management of paid male employees who collected and analyzed data on the recipients of relief, and coordinated their efforts with other local charities. It has been suggested that factors like increased immigration, urbanization and union activism, coupled with a periods of economic depression, destabilized society such that the well-to-do felt a need to exert control over what they perceived as an unruly, often undeserving class of paupers who had come to see poor relief as their right, not an act of charity for which they should be grateful.¹

Founded by Dr. Charles Lemeul Nichols of Worcester², the Associated Charities of Worcester was organized on March 18, 1890 and incorporated in 1903. Rev. Dr. W. H. Thomas of Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church was a prime mover in the organization, and the original directors were composed of prominent men and women in the city. The first general secretary was Mrs. Eliza J. Lee, who was succeeded in 1895 by Miss Miriam L. Witherspoon.³

The purpose of the Worcester Association was, in its own words, "to promote cordial co-operation on the part of the various charitable agencies of Worcester in the relief of the needy; to repress fraud and detect imposture; to prevent begging and the spread of pauperism; to foster thrift and self-respect among the poor; to bring sympathy and counsel to those who are in distress; in a word, 'to help the poor help themselves'."⁴

The Associated Charities of Worcester collection contains materials from the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. It includes annual reports, a history of the Association by Miss Miriam L. Witherspoon, administrative notes, and correspondence. The highlight of the collection are the more than 1,000 individual case files of individuals and families who applied for assistance between the 1890s and 1940s.

¹ See Katz, Michael B. "The Theory and Practice of Scientific Charity." In *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*, 58-84. New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1986.

² Nutt, Charles, *History of Worcester and Its People*, 4 vols, (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1919): vol. 3, 102. Google PDF eBook.

³ Ibid, vol. 2, 905. Google PDF eBook.

⁴ *Directory of Charitable and Beneficent Organizations*, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1903, prepared by the Associated Charities of Worcester. Worcester, Press of Charles Hamilton. Corrected June 1905. Worcester Historical Museum. PMF. Worcester Organizations.

The annual reports of the Massachusetts State Board of Charities (available online) contain reports submitted by the Associated Charities after it was incorporated in 1903.

The Associated Charities of Worcester Collection was donated by its successor Family Service Organization of Worcester, Inc., as of June 2019 doing business as Family Services of Central Massachusetts.⁵

⁵ Email dated May 31, 2019 from CEO Jim Regan.