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John Augustus, Father of Probation, and the Anonymous Letter

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*Charles Lindner, Professor Emeritus
Department of Law and Police Science*

*John Jay College of Criminal Justice
City University of New York*

JOHN AUGUSTUS WAS born in Woburn, Massachusetts , in 1785. Voluntarily and unofficially, he assisted minor offenders, including men, women, and children, for 18 years, until his death in Boston in 1859 at the age of 75. With the exception of “A Report Of the Labors of John Augustus” (a thin book of 104 pages, and undersized at 6 x 9 inches), he left little documenting his work. Some of the few remaining traces of his life and work include a picture of his home in Lexington, Massachusetts (where he lived from 1811 to 1828), a photo of his tombstone, and some case files of the offenders he unofficially supervised. Pictures of the aforementioned can be found in the 1939 edition of the book. The book contains no personal or familial information except in relation to his work.

Another important remaining historical item is an anonymous letter, “in reply to certain inquiries, made by a benevolent gentleman...relative to the past philanthropic labors of Augustus.” While many criminal justice students are familiar with Augustus’ book, few are acquainted with the letter. Although the letter was not originally intended for the press, the writer subsequently released it, hoping that it would “strengthen the hands of Augustus.” The letter is entitled “The Labors of Mr. John Augustus, The Well-Known Philanthropist, From One Who Knows Him.” It was made available for private circulation in Boston during December of 1858.

The letter was subsequently shown to Augustus, who said in acknowledgement, “I have examined your letter, and have found but few details in it requiring correction, and these of unimportant character. The main statistical statements are true; and I thank you for your solicitude in a matter which I have so much at heart” (Anonymous, 1858:1). Although the writer’s name was not attached to the nine-page letter, it was stated that it was written by a person who knows Augustus.

Contents of the Letter

The writer of the letter notes that not only does the law punish the offender indiscriminately for his/her crime, but throughout his life, even after he has atoned for his wrongdoing. He becomes subject to “scorn and finger-pointing suspicion which most of our people arrogate to themselves as a special duty.” As a result he suffers a loss of self-esteem whereas one kind word may have prevented this (Anonymous, 1858:4).

The letter writer notes similar consequences for the female offender, stating that “it is enough for

the world to know that she has done wrong, and at once the door of mercy and kindness is closed against her, and she is shut out, to associate only with those who would plunge her soul deeper in the pit of error (Anonymous, 1858:5).” The writer finds, however, that unlike most in the community, Augustus is unwilling to shun the wrong-doer, but instead opens the door of his own home to help the “wanderer from virtue” (Anonymous, 1858:5). He further writes that when Augustus first commenced his unpaid labors, he bailed out of the Police Court individuals who were common drunkards. Helping to improve their behavior while he held them under informal control for a short time, he was so successful in improving their behavior that often the judge would impose a small fine instead of imprisonment.

The letter-writer recounts that originally “Augustus confined his Philanthropy to the male sex...” but after a year his “attention was called to the claims of women who were common inebriates, some of them mothers of families, some of them young girls fresh from the toils of heartless seducers, who had abandoned them. Others, not inebriates, who, charged with petty crimes, or having crimes imputed to them, had no power of defense but what their simple denials included” (Anonymous, 1858:6-7). Although it is not noted in the letter, Augustus also worked with children, some as young as six and seven years old (Augustus, 1852:42).

The anonymous letter-writer further records the “petty prosecution” suffered by Augustus as his workload increased, reporting that “As the number of cases accumulated with Augustus, so did his cares and troubles” (Anonymous, 1858:7). It was noted that police and other officers received a fee of less than a dollar if there was a conviction in a case where they had testified, as well as an extra fee for a warrant or writ resulting in the incarceration of a defendant. Inasmuch as Augustus would bail out many defendants who would otherwise have been imprisoned, officers often suffered financially from his labors. Augustus’ book states that officers would sometimes wait until Augustus was outside of the courtroom, before calling a case in which he was likely to bail out the defendant. Through this subterfuge a defendant would be hurried before the judge, often convicted, and thereby enabling the officers to collect small fees (Augustus, 1852:63).

Both the letter and Augustus’ book further recount that he originally “operated principally in the Police Court; but...later extended his efforts to the Municipal Court, where their results were more important, and his labors and responsibilities were more onerous” (Anonymous, 1858:7).

Moreover, the anonymous letter is replete with praise for the work of Augustus “...in raising the fallen—reforming the criminal, and in attending to the offices of philanthropy, which, by the blessing of heaven, are so promotive of benefit to individuals, and good to society” (Anonymous, 1858:8). The letter writer informs us, for example, “...that, out of nearly two thousand persons for whom he has become responsible, only ten have proved ungrateful for his goodness, and by absconding, suffered him to be defaulted and to be sued (four times, I believe,) for the amounts for which he had become bail” (Anonymous, 1858:8).

In contrast, the writer observes that “Mr. Augustus has had his villifiers, who have taxed him with selfishness, insincerity, and a great many things equally unjust and uncharitable.” Examples of the attacks on Augustus, including some printed in the newspapers, can be found in his book. One of the most vicious was that of a Mike Walsh, of the *Daily Print* of 1848 (Augustus, 1852:78-79). He accuses Augustus of benefiting financially from his charitable work, and that he “seems to have a great itching for notoriety, and dollars.” Walsh asks who ...“gave him a license to take uncontrolled possession of every woman that is brought up, or comes up to the Police and Municipal Courts?” (Augustus, 1852:79). In addition he charges Augustus with using the courts to bleed “thousands, and of gratifying his other propensities” (Augustus, 1852:79). Walsh ends his verbal attack by referring to Augustus as a “Peter Funk philanthropist, and pea-nut reformer,” and states that “unless he conducts himself henceforth with a great deal more propriety, we shall take it upon ourselves to teach him decency” (Augustus, 1852:79).

Sadly, the letter-writer records the emotional and physical difficulties experienced by Augustus in the course of his demanding volunteer work. The writer notes that “As the number of cases accumulated with Mr. Augustus, so did his cares and troubles” (Anonymous, 1858:7). Moreover, although Augustus had the use of some moderate wealth early on from his bootmaker business,

“The unceasing calls made upon his time destroyed his business...; but, absorbed in the good he was daily doing, he nevertheless continued it steadily and undeviating, undeterred by any discouragement of a pecuniary nature” (Anonymous, 1858:8). The author of the letter backs up his account through the inclusion of a chart, taken from court records between the years of 1842 and 1858, that showed the number bailed and the amount of bail posted by Augustus during this period. The letter writer also notes that “...a few friends have privately furnished him with funds which he has religiously spent for purely philanthropic objects” (Anonymous, 1858:58-9).

Augustus himself revealed his financial difficulties near the end of his book. On the last page of his book he notes that his “time has not been spent in getting out books, but in getting persons out of jail.” He asks those who wish to provide him with “assistance by pecuniary aid or otherwise” to visit him at his residence. Somewhat despondently, he ends his book with the promise that “It will, I trust, afford peculiar satisfaction to those who have aided me to know, that the funds which they have contributed have not been misapplied” (Augustus, 1852:104).

As is true of many volunteers and charitable workers, Augustus sacrificed himself for the good of others. Unquestionably, he appropriately deserves the title of “the Father of Probation.”

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