

Augustus, John

John Augustus (1784/1785–1859), a successful shoemaker, a prominent citizen in Boston, and the acknowledged “father of probation,” was born in Woburn, Massachusetts. He was known primarily for his pioneering efforts to divert drunkards and other minor offenders from incarceration, and it is estimated that at the time of his death, he had helped almost 2,000 prisoners at a personal cost of \$243,234. He is also credited with coining the word *probation*, from the Latin word *probare* (meaning to test or to prove).

Little is known of **Augustus's** background or early years. At the age of 21, he moved to Lexington, Massachusetts, and became a cordwainer (shoemaker), eventually owning his own business. One indication of his prosperity occurred in 1819, when he deeded a large tract of land to the Lexington Academy to establish a school where he became a trustee. He moved to Boston in 1827 and continued his work as shoemaker. In 1841, **Augustus** was an active member of the Washington Total Abstinence Society and became increasingly concerned that poor drunks and petty criminals were receiving harsh mandatory sentences that were not warranted by the nature of the crime and the offenders' backgrounds. He felt that first-time offenders could best be rehabilitated if spared the sometimes horrendous experience of a prison sentence.

Later that same year, while attending a session of the Boston Police Court, **Augustus** witnessed a case involving a drunkard. He petitioned the court to defer the offender's sentence for three weeks and to release him under **Augustus's** supervision. He took the man into his home and found him a job. At the end of this probationary period, the man returned to court completely sober with a dramatically improved appearance, having signed a pledge with **Augustus** that he would stop drinking and stay out of trouble. The judge was astonished and persuaded of the sincerity of the man's reformation, and he waived the usual 30-day incarceration in the House of Correction, instead imposing a nominal fine of one cent plus court costs of \$3.76.

Augustus continued to visit various Boston courts almost on a daily basis, sometimes acting as counsel for offenders, furnishing bail, and even finding homes for some juvenile miscreants. He was selective in choosing those to help, taking into consideration the age of the prospective probationer and his character, among other criteria. In 1843, **Augustus** expanded his interests to include children, both girls and boys, eventually supervising about 30 children whose ages ranged from 9 to 16. He continued to work as a shoemaker until 1846, when he had accumulated enough money to support himself and his endeavors without working.

Augustus's seemingly strange and unorthodox practices periodically brought him into conflict with some court officials and the police. At that time, police and other officers could receive payment of less than a dollar if there was a conviction in a case in which they had testified. An extra fee was also available for a warrant or writ resulting in incarceration. **Augustus** would bail out many defendants who would otherwise have been imprisoned, and some police officers obviously suffered financially from this practice. There were reports that officers would often wait until **Augustus** was outside the courtroom before calling a case in whose defendant



John Augustus, considered the “father of probation” for his efforts in the mid-1800s to persuade the Boston Police Court to release offenders into his supervision rather than jailing them.

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Augustus was likely to take an interest. The officers would then hurry the offender before the judge and, after he was convicted, would be able to collect their fees.

In 1852, the 104-page *A Report of the Labors of John Augustus* was published in Boston, perhaps the only firsthand account of his work. The book contains no information about his family or his personal life, except that relating to his work. In 1858, an anonymous nine-page letter, *The Labors of Mr. John Augustus, the Well-Known Philanthropist, From One Who Knows Him*, was circulated in Boston. According to the author and acquaintance of **Augustus**, it was hoped that it would garner more public support for **Augustus's** work. After reading the letter himself, **Augustus** acknowledged the truth and unbiased nature of the observations contained within it.

Augustus died in Boston on June 21, 1859, at the age of 75. His legacy continued after his death, and by 1869 the Massachusetts legislature had passed a law requiring a state agent to be present in court if the process could result in the placement of a child in a reformatory. In 1878, a law was enacted that assigned a regular probation officer to the criminal courts of Boston and a probation statute establishing an official state probation system with salaried probation officers. Other states quickly followed. Even today, there are numerous examples of **Augustus's** continued influence. Several state and national professional probation and parole associations have named one of their prestigious awards in memory of **John Augustus**. For example, the Order of **Augustus**, presented annually by the Probation Officers Advisory Board of the Judicial Conference of Indiana, is awarded to an outstanding probation officer who exemplifies the ideals of **John Augustus**.

—Charles B. Fields

Further Readings

Anonymous. *The Labors of Mr. John Augustus, the Well-Known Philanthropist, From One Who Knows Him*. Boston: [s.n.], 1858. Available from the New York Historical Society.

Augustus, John **John Augustus: First Probation Officer**. Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1972.

Augustus, John *A Report of the Labors of John Augustus*. Boston: Wright and Hasty, Printers, 1852. Reprint. Lexington, KY: American Probation and Parole Association, 1984.

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