

Editor's Note: The following article is reprinted (with updated format editions) from The Journal of Volunteer Administration, Fall 1968, 2 (3), pp. 11-23

The Volunteer Movement in the United States

Bernard M. Kapell

(no contemporary contact information available)

(Editor-generated) Abstract

The author describes the historical development of volunteerism in the United States as well as the current status of volunteerism in the country as of 1968.

(Editor-generated) Key Words:

volunteerism, United States, history

The volunteer in the United States is a citizen by birth or naturalization, or a non-citizen; young or old, or at some in-between age; male or female. In short, a volunteer is anyone who joins an organization or a cause without financial remuneration for services rendered because he or she believes in it or chooses to become a member of that group. He thus extends the services of this group beyond that possible by the paid personnel of the organization. In some instances there may not be paid personnel; the organization's leadership and its program may be conducted entirely by volunteers.

A volunteer may possess a considerable degree of competence for the assignment he undertakes or may have little experience or skill. Regardless of his competence, the essential factor is that he functions without financial remuneration. This does not mean that the volunteer works outside of a 'reward system' - only that the reward is in a form other than money. For the volunteer the term 'reward' and 'money' are not synonymous. A study of the growth of the volunteer movement in this country is sufficient evidence of the meaningful and personal satisfactions the volunteer achieves through service.

It has been estimated that more than ten thousand national, regional, state, and

local voluntary health and health related agencies now exist in this country. Educated guesses have been made that over 51 million volunteers are serving the estimated ten thousand agencies. Of this number about 30 percent are men and women gainfully employed who serve during their free time. Students, both male and female, make up about 10 percent of the total. By and large women comprise the largest representation, with approximately 55 percent of their number in the category of housewives.

Many volunteers are concerned with church or church-related activity. This is a logical extension of the origins of the volunteer movement in the United States. William Penn (1644-1718) founder of Pennsylvania, is known to have appreciated the value of money, but he believed God gave men wealth to use rather than to hoard. His puritanical attitude reflected his conscience. He believed that if the money wasted on extravagance were put to public use the wants of the poor would be well satisfied. "The best recreation is to do good," was one of his frequently heard pieces of advice.

During the early years of our history Cotton Mather (1663-1728) stood above most men in the development of philanthropy. This grandson of two of the

founders of Massachusetts was an early and outstanding exponent of voluntarism. He proposed that men and women acting as individuals or as members of voluntary associations should engage in a "perpetual endeavor to do good in the world." His own charitable gifts were generous enough to make him virtually a one-man relief and aid society. He promoted many charitable activities, among which were associations for helping needy clergymen and for building churches. Furthermore, he showed a sincere and perceptive concern for the poor by urging extreme care in the bestowal of alms. He believed giving wisely was an obligation equal to giving generously. Cotton Mather's objectives were not new - but the proposed voluntary method was - and it was destined to characterize philanthropy in America even unto the present.

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) of kite-flying fame was probably not aware of the Quaker influence on his character and career, but the evidence of his work bears witness to his close association with 'The Friends.' He has been quoted as saying that "Leisure is time for doing something useful." In keeping with his own advice he used his leisure to advance his own knowledge, and he worked just as earnestly for social improvement within the community.

At the age of 42 Franklin retired from active work in the business field and devoted his intelligence, his ingenuity, and his talents to service for the common good. He was instrumental in the formation of a club, "The Junto," dedicated to the mutual improvement of its members; out of this grew the first library, started in 1731 by the club. His contributions to better community living are exemplified by the diversity of his activities and service, all of which resulted in improved patterns of community living: he founded a volunteer fire company;

developed systems for paving, cleaning and lighting the streets of Philadelphia; sponsored a plan for policing the city; was instrumental in the establishment of the Pennsylvania Hospital and the Academy which later became the University of Pennsylvania; he founded the American Philosophical Society in 1743 for promoting research in the natural and social sciences; and because of his work and interest in establishing a postal system became known as the 'father' of the U. S. Mail.

Franklin suggested two major principles which were later recognized as good public policy and constructive philanthropy. He articulated the importance of preventing poverty, rather than relieving it; and he demonstrated that the principle of self-help so frequently prescribed for the individual man could be applied with equally beneficial results to society.

Another Philadelphian, Benjamin Rush (1746- 1813), soldier, teacher, statesman and writer, made his major contribution as a physician during the Yellow Fever epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793. His treatment of the disease is now known to have been ineffective, but without doubt his faith in his cure and the confidence he inspired were key factors in allaying the panic in the early stages of the epidemic.

This emergency evoked a new type of community action. Mayor Matthew Clarkson and a small group of public spirited citizens remained in the plague-ridden city while others were fleeing; they organized themselves into a 'voluntary committee' and gradually involved many other citizens. In this manner they provided extra- ordinary services to the stricken community.

Stephen Girard was a hard-driving businessman who would not have made anyone's list as a likely candidate to become a leading volunteer. Born in France in 1750, he became a sailor and settled in

Philadelphia about 1775. He was a self-made man whose gospel was work, laissez-faire, and 'caveat emptor.' Girard became a volunteer because he was impatient with the interruption of business as a result of the Yellow Fever epidemic in Philadelphia. He undertook to organize things so that business could go on as usual. The duty he assumed for a few days stretched into two months. With the dedicated help of Peter Helm, another volunteer, and a French doctor, Jean Deveze, a makeshift pest-house at Bush Hill was transformed into a well functioning hospital. They were not able to effect miraculous cures, but with care the staff turned Bush Hill into a haven of mercy for the sick and dying.

Girard responded to specific needs rather than to general causes. Unlike Dr. Rush and others who had reformer impulses, Girard was not interested in preventing social disorder, nevertheless he was an example for acts of compassion and public usefulness.

The name Alexis de Tocqueville is known to all of you. Permit me to quote him once again:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations....I have often admired the extreme skill with which the inhabitants of the United States succeed in proposing a common object to the exertions of a great many men and in inducing them voluntarily to pursue it As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have taken up an opinion or a feeling which they wish to promote in the world, they look out for mutual assistance; and as soon as they have found each other out, they combine. From that moment they are no longer isolated men, but a power seen from afar, whose actions serve

for an example, and whose language is listened to.

De Tocqueville was a twenty-five year old French lawyer when he came to this country in the Spring of 1831. Ostensibly, his nine-month journey through the United States was to gather material for a report on American prison systems; his real interest was deeper. In his own words, he was interested in "all mechanisms of the vast American society which everyone talks of and nobody knows." He proved himself a perceptive student and recorded what he observed. He recognized that voluntarism, and the role of the volunteer, was already an integral element in the cultural and sociological pattern of the United States. Future historians and sociologists validated his observation that democracy, by reducing barriers of class and privilege, generated and stimulated a feeling of compassion for all of the human race.

The earlier role for volunteers had been concerned mainly with alleviating distress after it appeared. Eventually enlightened citizens recognized other social needs and worked to improve conditions which caused illness and dependency. The story merits telling, but the list of outstanding men and women is too long to detail here. Several names deserve brief mention.

Joseph Tuckerman (1778-1840) of Boston, and John Griscom (1774-1840) of New York, were two influential reformers who did not fear that helping the poor would inevitably pauperize them. They supported many reform movements and helped initiate a new series of important conceptual additions to our cultural pattern: the spread of savings banks, life insurance, and benefit societies among the poor.

Robert M. Hartley (1796-1881) was concerned with the material needs of the poor. In 1843 he founded the New York

Association for the Poor, and he directed its activities for the next thirty years. During this time he staunchly supported advances in the fields of housing, sanitation, and child welfare.

Dorothea Dix (1802-1887) was a trained teacher who became involved in improving conditions in insane asylums. For four decades this New England spinster maneuvered and cajoled public leaders and politicians, as well as the general public, into greater efforts to alleviate the shocking conditions under which the mentally ill lived.

By the second decade of the 1800's the volunteer in the United States was ready to accept international responsibilities. Money was raised for the cause of Greek independence. In the autumn of 1830 a shipload of food was sent to the starving inhabitants of the Cape Verde Islands. Irish-Americans demonstrated their sympathy for the sufferers in the Irish famine of 1846-47, but the generous response of all Americans transcended ethnic and religious boundaries. These were but a few of many similar demonstrations of volunteer compassion.

Up to this point the voluntary movement was dominated by the male sex. As the country developed economically after the Civil War the role of American women underwent a subtle and steady change. Little is known about the lives of the majority of American women in the 1800's, and almost nothing about those in the lower income groups. Poverty is a leveler of great force, and drabness is generally fairly uniform. Both are shrouded in a charitable cloak of anonymity. The customs and ideas of women of the middle and upper classes are better known because their patterns of living had greater visibility to those who could take notes. With increasing prosperity and decreasing time demands for household duties, these women began to discover personal interests to absorb their developing

leisure. Some gravitated into the business world; others found expression in serving the less fortunate. Inevitably the service role of the volunteer attracted increasing numbers of women.

One of the pioneers in helping other members of her sex find ways to express themselves and to develop their individuality was Sara Josepha Hale (1788-1879). Her vehicle was the first big women's periodical, *The Boston Ladies Magazine*, and she was its first editor. Mrs. Hale was a feminist and a persistent and effective reformer. She invidiously fostered discontent with women's lot and encouraged them to enter the labor market at lower wages, in competition with men. Later, as editor of *Godey's Ladies Book*, she popularized labor saving devices in the home and encouraged her readers to engage in other worthwhile activities outside the home, with the released time.

Other women may have taken more forthright action, but Mrs. Hale drove a wedge into the economic and cultural life of the American scene through which women marched thereafter in ever-increasing numbers.

Clara Barton (1821-1912) advanced the role of her sex and contributed a humanitarian and social concept to the ideals of many who followed her. This dedicated New Englander was a small woman - only a little over five feet in height -but she was a veritable tiger under her nurse's hood. She had a simple philosophy: "What is nobody's business is my business" - an effective guidepost for leadership in any public activity. At the age of fifty, following a chance meeting in Switzerland in 1870 with officials of the International Committee of The Red Cross, she decided to found an American Red Cross Society which would respond to public disasters by giving temporary help to victims of misfortune beyond their control. Her goal was to

systematize and centralize relief activities in public emergencies so that the unhappy victims could be helped to return to normal lives. Clara Barton met considerable resistance, but this lady with a 'whim of iron' fought the good fight and incorporated The American Red Cross Association in 1881. She was able to make sense to the American people as she showed what could and should be done for victims of natural disasters and catastrophes.

The 1880's also saw the beginning of a new type of volunteer. De Tocqueville's book, "Democracy in America", had pointed out the limited number of very rich men in this country in the year of its publication - 1835. Andrew Carnegie, born in Scotland in that same year, came to this country in 1848; by 1885 he was a striking example of the new 'millionaire' class. This group of men put new vigor into philanthropy and the role of the volunteer in carrying out the programs of their choice. They were not concerned with improving the morals of the poor or in reforming their characters. They preferred to make indirect contributions - to the community at large instead of to individuals. Libraries, parks, concert halls, and institutions such as Cooper Union and Pratt Institute were their tangible products.

Voluntaryism in those decades was dominated by the 'big givers' who, by the start of the 1890's, numbered 4047, according to an estimate made that year by the New York Tribune. These men did not necessarily concur with Carnegie that it 'was a disgrace to die rich,' but many distributed large portions of their surplus wealth during their lifetime.

In contrast to the wealthy, who used money as the vehicle for serving the public good, others stepped forward with less tangible but equally valuable gifts.

Louis Dembitz Brandeis (1856-1941) spent a quarter century after his graduation

from Harvard Law School in 1877 as an eminently successful practicing attorney. In the Supreme Court case of *Muller vs. Oregon* (1908) he presented cogent sociological, statistical, economic and psychological arguments in favor of limiting women's working hours, and thus established the precedent for subsequent social welfare legislation. This now famous 'Brandeis Brief' revolutionized the practice of law by introducing the elements of 'human values and needs' into what had otherwise been rigid legalistic patterns. From this point on he devoted himself almost exclusively to practicing law in the public interest. Among other things, he broke the transportation monopoly in New England, protected the consumer against unwarranted railroad rate increases, investigated insurance practices, and was instrumental in the establishment of the Massachusetts savings bank life insurance plan which became a model for other such plans throughout the country. Until his appointment to the Supreme Court of the United States he served without pay as attorney 'for the people' in their fight against many financial and industrial monopolies, and he advanced the cause of conservation of natural resources. What Louis Brandeis did in the field of law to shape a meaningful social philosophy was emulated by talented men in other fields. The National Tuberculosis Association, founded in 1904, was followed within the next twenty years by The National Society for the Prevention of Blindness, The American Social Health Association, The National Association for Mental Health, The American Cancer Society, The National Society for Crippled Children and Adults, and The American Heart Association. The growth of these national voluntary health agencies, and others equally dedicated, was possible because the medical profession and para-medical individuals and groups all

contributed their specialized knowledge and skills to the social and educational processes required by the National Health and health-related agencies. The voluntary health movement presented a vehicle to leading men and women in these fields to work in the public interest - this time for the better health of all mankind.

So much for history. It has been said that history is prologue for today. Today is now - so let us look together at some significant factors which led to the expansion of the volunteer movement, a phenomenon of substantive impact peculiar to the United States:

- The increased recognition of social ills, and the assumption of responsibility for working toward their amelioration;
- Increased immigration and the sensitivity of foreign born and 'the new Americans' who eagerly accepted the folkways of this country and with this the opportunity to serve as volunteers;
- Expansion of the 'middle class' and increased leisure time available to its members;
- The successful institution of the 'membership concept,' which identified the volunteer specifically with the agency he served;
- Agency competence in imparting a sense of conviction for their mission;
- The growth of a professional staff who could break down agency programs to task-oriented work assignments.

The number of volunteers has multiplied, but so has the number of associations depending on volunteers. Each association must therefore cope with two

fundamental questions: "What motivates a volunteer to join?" And, more important, "What sustains his interest and keeps him a volunteer?"

We can assess these motivational drives in the light of a psychological theory first advanced by A. H. Maslow in his book, *Motivation and Personality*. This theory presents insight into the dynamics undergirding human behavior and is built on several principles:

- Man is a 'wanting' animal;
- Satisfied needs do not motivate behavior - unsatisfied needs influence what man does;
- Human needs and wants are arranged in a hierarchy. When needs at a lower or more elemental level are fulfilled the higher level needs emerge and demand satisfaction;
- Need levels are of relative - not absolute - importance, and several may obtain and overlap at any given time.

To complete this set of principles Professor Maslow presented a hierarchy of psychological human needs, and it is to this hierarchy that we can look to acquire a better understanding of what motivates a volunteer.

The hierarchy does not concern itself with human behavior - only with the motivational needs which lead to behavior. How a person acts after he is motivated is conditioned by the situational determinants. Motivation triggers the individual. He actualizes his behavior in relation to other people and to the circumstances that are created as a result of people reacting in an environment conditioned by the cultural determinants of society.

About the Author

In 1968, Bernard M. Kapell was Training Director, American Heart Association, Inc., New York.