# Diversity at the Dam



#### The Labor Force

During the 1870s and 1880s (Gilded Age), the United States had experienced brisk economic growth and expansion driven by investment in steel, coal and railroads.

Economic turmoil in the 1890s, notably The Panic of 1893, caused uncertainty and depressions that affected every sector of the economy (silver, wheat and banking).

In Massachusetts, funding for the immense Metropolitan Water Works project (1895), which included the Wachusett Dam and Reservoir, offered nearly ten years of steady employment and good wages well above living costs for those willing to work.

The stability of the project, with its prospects for long term employment, attracted diverse groups of workers from local populations, southern African-Americans and energetic Italian newcomers to work on the great water project.

There were issues with this labor force. Locals tended to be better educated and rose higher in the ranks. Italians had to contend with the language barrier patronage. English-speaking African-Americans, having had by this time established a rising middle class, fared generally better than the Italians, especially in their living conditions.

Ultimately, the things that concerned all workers was the assurance of a wage which would enable them to improve their conditions and to comfortably raise their families.

## The Cost of Living

Many ask how people in that era managed to survive on the meager pay. But prices were also low at time and the main goal of all was to earn more than they spent.

Figures and statistics included at the end of this article indicate that, in comparison to national averages for other occupations, the project offered greater earnings potential, a chance to get ahead while at the same time a safe haven from market turmoil.

These figures in the charts below indicate that wages for skilled tradesmen in construction ranged from \$780 to \$1,200 per year. The wage for unskilled labor was at least comparable to national averages for mechanics of all kinds. The average family earning \$680-880 per year spent over 93% of it on living expenses (\$632 - \$818 per year).

Bear in mind that this entire project occurred in an era predating the Income Tax!

## The Images

The following images have been generously provided by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) and can be found online at:

Digital Commonwealth Massachusetts Collections Online <a href="https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/collections/commonwealth.g732dh56k">https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/collections/commonwealth.g732dh56k</a>

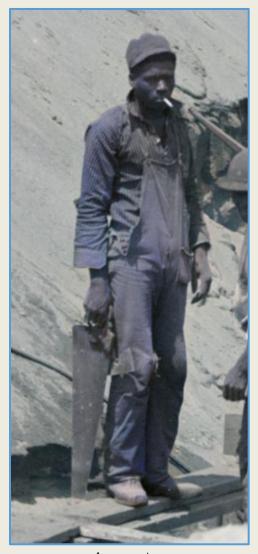
Arranged in no particular order, they indicate that all worked equally hard, and harmoniously, together. Many more examples, too numerous to include here, lie hidden within the photographs. Keep watch for them as you scan the images.



A man shows his curiosity for the camera by peering out of the second floor (bedroom) window. The house was located on River Street almost exactly on the centerline of the future dam.



Tunnel excavation crew.



A carpenter.



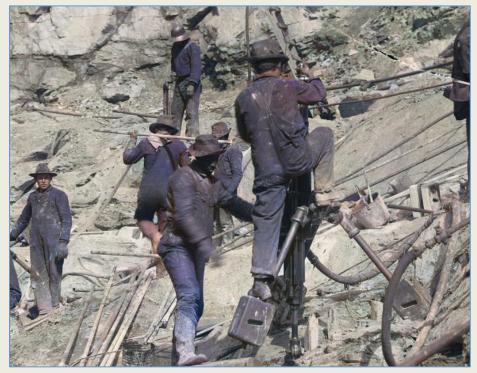
A work gang forming and pouring concrete.



A crew laying brick arches at the Assabet River Bridge.



A pipe layer on a short break.



These men are operating a rock drill in preparation for blasting. Rock removal was found in every aspect of this work.



After a hard workday a man catches some rest, possibly after a well-earned dinner. Too tired to go inside, he sleeps right where he is. Notice the well-kept housing provided by this contractor and the frying pan on the pole for outdoor cooking. The Italians very often had only mud huts for shelter.



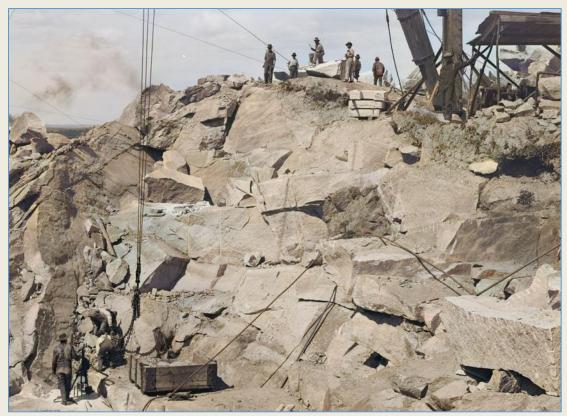
Rock drill crews at the quarry in Boylston.



In construction, even to this day, equipment operators generally earn at higher rates of pay for their skill, long training and responsibility for life safety. This winch is paired with a derrick and can lift 6 tons.



Men who could handle horses and wagon were called teamsters. That name has remained with those who move freight on wheels.



Getting out rock at the Quarry involved the lifting, over the heads of other workers, of heavy loads with a derrick (crane).



This man is the operator the derrick, a very important position.



After the blast, huge rocks are split by hand into manageable pieces with old fashioned wedges.



There was even work for youngsters in the days before labor laws prevented it.



Another teamster, this time driving a two-horse dump wagon built by Studebaker, the future auto manufacturer.



This crew is preparing seedlings for transplanting in the watershed.

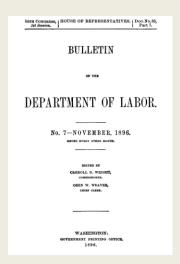


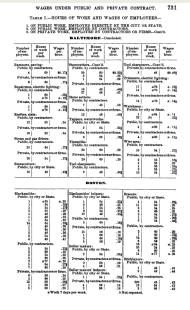
Chaining the huge rubble stones on flatcars for delivery by cableway to the work below.

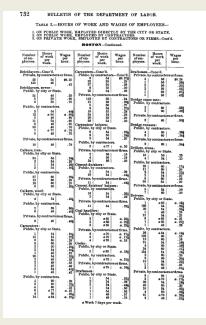


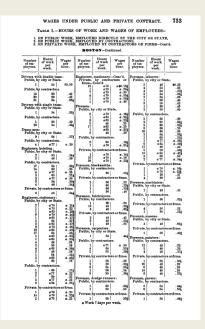
Cyclists viewing the work.

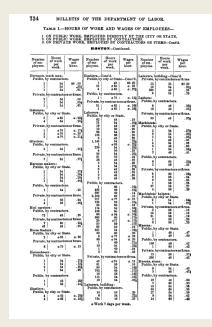
# **Wage Scales for Construction Workers**



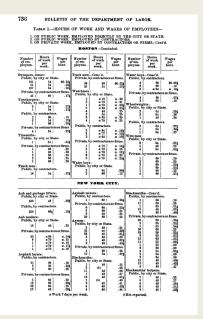


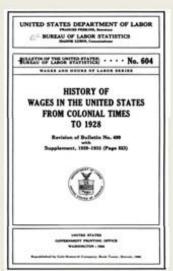






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	Boston, Mass.				
Year	Hours per week	Rate per hour			
1860	54.0	\$0,300			
1891	54.0	. 301			
1892	54.0	. 303			
1893	54.0	, 304			
1894	54.0	. 305			
1895	54.0	. 303			
1896	54.0	. 303			
1897	54.0	. 303			
1506	54.0	. 305			
1000	54.0	. 305			
1900	49, 4	, 305			
1600	48.9	. 338			
1903	48.9	. 337			
1904.	48.0	. 349			
1905	48.1	1079			
1906	40.2	405			
1907	48.0	478			
1908	48.0	438			
1909	48.0	478			
1910	44.0	500			
1911	44.0	. 500			

	Boston, Mass.1			
Year	Hours per week	Rate per hour		
1800	59. 8 59. 7 59. 8 59. 7 59. 7 59. 7 59. 8 59. 5 59. 5 59. 5 59. 5 59. 5	\$0. 173 - 173 - 173 - 173 - 173 - 173 - 173 - 175 - 175 - 175 - 175 - 175 - 175 - 176 - 192 - 192 - 192 - 193 - 189		

	North	Atlantic
Year	Hours per week	Rate per hour
1890	56. 2	\$0.823
1891	56.4 56.8	.318 .315
1893 1894	56.0 55.9	.316 .313
1895 1896	55. 7 55. 6	.812 .815
1807	55.1	. 319

TABLE B-16.—Stone masons

I ear	Hours per week	Rate per hour
	56. 2 56. 4	\$0. 823 . 318
	56. 8 56. 0 55. 9	.815 .816 .818
	55.7 55.6 55.1	.312 .315 .319
	58.8 54.4 53.0	. 333 . 329 . 340
	52.9 51.5 49.8	. 354 . 381 . 428
	48. 6 47. 6 47. 5	.448 .465 .477

In 1900 - \$18 per week; \$950 per year

TABLE B-2 .- Bricklayers Boston, Mass.

Yoar	Hours per week	Rate per hour		
1890 1891	53. 8 53. 8	\$0.398 .427		
1892 1893 1894	50. 9 49. 4 48. 8	.431 .441 .450		
1895 1896	48.1 48.0	.448		
1897 1898 1899	48.0 48.0 48.0	. 457 . 466 . 475		
1900	48. 0 48. 0	. 480 . 505		
1902 1903 1904	48.0 48.0	. 525		
1905	48.0 47.7	. 550		

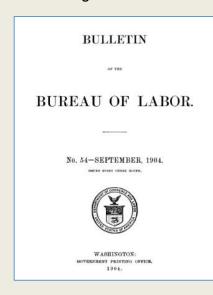
In 1900 - \$23 per week; \$1,200 per year

TABLE B-27.—Granite cutters.

	North A	Atlantic
Year	Hours per week	Rate per hour
1890	54. 5	\$0, 330
1891	54.2	. 337
1892	53. 9	. 339
1893	53. 9	. 344
1894	52. 9	. 346
1895	53. 4	. 841
1896	53.4	. 337
1897	53. 4	. 333
1898	58.5	. 325
1899	52.0	. 328
1900	50.1	. 356
1901	49. 6	. 363
1902	49. 5	. 370
1903	48.5	. 389
1904	47. 9	. 383
1905	47. 5	.411
1906	47. 6	. 413

In 1900 - \$18 per week; \$950 per year

## Cost of Living



Page 1129

#### COST OF LIVING AND RETAIL PRICES IN THE UNITED STATES.

BY G. W. W. HANGER.

While the Bureau of Labor in 1890 and 1891 in its Sixth and Seventh Annual Reports published data in great detail relative to the cost of living of workingmen's families whose heads were engaged in the iron, steel, coal, coke, iron ore, cotton, woolen, and glass industries, the great changes in economic conditions since these reports were issued rendered this material of little value as the basis for an exhibit of the work of the Bureau along these lines. It was peculiarly fortunate, therefore, that the forthcoming Eighteenth Annual Report became available in sufficient time to permit of its use for this purpose. This report, a summary of which has appeared in the Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor for July, 1904 (No. 33), is the annual report for the year 1903, and presents the results of an investigation procecuted in every section of our country into the cost of living of workingmen's families and the retail prices of the principal staple articles of food consumed by such families. As stated, this investigation covered two subjects, distinct in character, yet closely allied; that into cost of living covered the year 1901, and its object was to determine the cost of living covered the year 1901, and its object was to determine the cost of living fond, clothing, etc., in the average workingman's family in the United States, while that into retail prices covered the period from 1890 to 1903 and had for its object the collection of data which would show the extent of increase or decrease in the retail prices of the staple articles of food during the period and thus render it possible to determine, approximately at least, the changes in cost of living in the several years covered.

#### COST OF LIVING.

In carrying out the investigation, reports of their actual expendi-tures for a year were secured from 25,440 families residing in the principal industrial localities in 38 States. Among the occupations represented are mechanics of all kinds, railroad employees, common laborers, clerks earning less than \$1,200 per year, etc. The reports, which were secured directly from the husband or wife, or both, by the personal visits of agents of the Bareau, show they and sex of the various members of the family; the amount earned by

BULLETIN OF THE BUREAU OF LABOR.

ach member; the family income for the year from all sources; the number of weeks worked during the year by the head of the family; the number of weeks worked during the year by the head of the family; the number of rooms occupied; the amount expended for rent, or, if the house was owned by the occupant and encumbered, the amount paid for interest and on principal; the amounts expended for food, clothing, fuel, lighting, and sundries; also the amount of surplus or deficit at the end of the year.

From 2,567 families reports were secured showing in detail the expenditure for each of the principal articles of food and the quantity consumed; the expenditure for clothing for husband, wife, and children; for taxes; insurance; labor organizations, etc.; religious purposes; furniture; books and newspapers; amusements; liquors; tobacco; medical attendance, etc.; also the disposition of the surplus; if any, and the method of meeting the deficit, if expenditures exceeded income.

The charts on exhibit relating to family conditions and cost of living in 25,440 families present in graphic form some of the most interest-ing facts disclosed by the investigation. In the list of these charts which follows reference is made by number to the tables which furnish the data for each:

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## CHARTS RELATING TO 25,440 FAMILIES

(	COST	of I	IVIN	G Al	nd R	ETAI	L PR	ICES.		:	1133
The 25 tables charts follow:	s con	tainii	ng th	ie dat	ta wh	nich i	form	the 1	basis	of th	ne 41
TABLE 1.—NUMBER TURE PER FAMIL DIVISIONS AND G	Y, AND	PER (	CENT (	OF TOT	'AL IN	COME	EXPEN				
[The average shown expenditure	for eac s for su	h item ch item	of exp	enditu total ex	re rela pendit	tes to ure per	those family	amilies is for a	only Il fami	that re lies.]	ported
	Fam	ilies.	Total	Avera		enditur expend			aving	Total ex-	Per cent of
Geographical division and general nativity of head of family.		Aver- age size.	in- come per fam- ily.	Rent.	Fuel.	Light- ing.	Cloth- ing.	Food.	Other pur- poses.	pendi- ture per fam- ily.	total in- come ex- pend- ed.
North Atlantic States: Native Foreign	7, 359 6, 423			\$130.73 123.93			\$93.08 94.20	\$306.31 327.49	\$135.47 136.27	\$696.44 713.01	93. 01 93. 4 <b>3</b>
Total	13, 782	4.80	755.49	127.63	30. 51	7.97	93.60	316.18	135.84	704.16	93.21
South Atlantic States: Native Foreign	1,995 198			97. 95 107. 20				289.09 354.07			93. 96 95. 55
Total	2, 193	5.16	690.80	98, 68	30.60	6.19	87.62	294.96	143.30	650, 18	94.12
North Central States: Native Foreign	4, 227 3, 113	4.68 5.39	756. 82 744. 55		30, 48 36, 30				171. 28 149. 28		94. 29 94. 34
Total	7,340	4.98	751.62	105.02	32.95	7.48	97.89	316.92	161.95	708.88	94. 31
South Central States: Native Foreign	1, 027 194	5, 21 5, 26	670, 64 700, 73						153.45 172.19		94. 80 94. 95
Total	1,221	5. 22	675.42	95. 38	24.04	4.97	88. 20	280. 94	156.43	640.44	94.82
Western States: Native Foreign	553 351	3. 96 4. 42	883. 14 883. 78					311. 18 327. 77			83. 99 84. 70
Total	904	4.14	883.39	147.48	34.84	8.14	119.66	317.62	146.14	744, 41	84.27

Table 1 - The average family earning \$680-880 per year spent over 93% of it on living expenses(\$632 - \$818 per year).

## 1138 BULLETIN OF THE BUREAU OF LABOR.

TABLE 11.—PER CENT OF TOTAL INCOME FROM HUSBANDS, WIVES, CHILDREN, BOARD-ERS AND LODGERS, AND OTHER SOURCES, BY GEOGRAPHICAL DIVISIONS AND GEN-ERAL NATIVITY OF HEAD OF FAMILY.

	1	Per cent of	total inco	me from—		í
Geographical division and general na- tivity of head of family.	Hus- bands.	Wives.	Children.	Boarders and lodgers.	Other sources.	Total.
North Atlantic States: Native Foreign	82.31 74.11	1.73 1.77	7. 03 12. 39	7.06 10.01	1.87 1.72	100. 100.
Total	78.45	1.75	9.55	8.45	1.80	100.
South Atlantic States: Native Foreign	76. 30 68. 14	1.94 1.65	11.00 16.60	9. 08 11. 98	1.68 1.63	100.
Total	75.48	1.91	11.56	9.37	1.68	100
North Central States: Native Foreign	85. 93 76. 74	.80	6. 27 12. 22	5. 63 7. 80	1.37 2.28	100. 100.
Total	82.07	. 87	8.77	6.54	1.75	100
South Central States: Native Foreign	80. 32 70. 65	1.67 1.27	9, 37 17, 27	6, 61 7, 86	2. 03 2. 95	100
Total	78. 73	1.60	10.67	6.82	2.18	100
Western States: Native Foreign	85. 80 80. 08	1.02	7. 26 10. 62	4.71 7.15	1. 21 1. 54	100 100
. Total	83.58	.86	8.57	5. 65	1.34	100

Table 2 – In the average family the husband earned 75-85% of total income.

#### 1138 BULLETIN OF THE BUREAU OF LABOR. TABLE 11 .- PER CENT OF TOTAL INCOME FROM HUSBANDS, WIVES, CHILDREN, BOARD-ERS AND LODGERS, AND OTHER SOURCES, BY GEOGRAPHICAL DIVISIONS AND GEN-ERAL NATIVITY OF HEAD OF FAMILY. Per cent of total income from-Geographical division and general na-tivity of head of family. Boarders Total. Other sources. Hus-bands. and lodgers. Wives. Children North Atlantic States: Native ......Foreign ..... 1.73 1.77 7.03 12.3982.31 74.11 7.06 10.01 78.45 1.75 9.55 8.45 1.80 100.0 Total ..... South Atlantic States: Native.....Foreign.... 75.48 1.91 11.56 9.37 1.68 100.0 Total ..... North Central States: Native.....Foreign.... .80 .96 6.27 12.225.63 7.80 82.07 . 87 8.77 6.54 1.75 100.0 Total ..... South Central States: Native...... $1.67 \\ 1.27$ 9, 37 17, 27 78. 78 10.67 6.82 2.18 100.0 1,60 Total ..... Western States: Native.....Foreign..... 1.02 .61 7.26 10.62 100.0 100.0 Total .... 83.58 .86 8.57 5.65 1.34 100.0

Table 11 – Many families had more than one source of revenue. On average, the husband's earnings made up about 80% of all income.

SURPLUS NOR A DEFICIT, BY GEOGRAPHICAL DIVISIONS A HEAD OF FAMILY.			
	Per cent	of families	reporting-
Geographical division and general nativity of head of family.	Surplus.	Deficit.	Neither surplus nor deficit.
orth Atlantic States: Native Foreign	55, 88 51, 44	16. 18 17. 28	28, 44 31, 28
Total	53, 54	16.70	29.76
outh Atlantic States: Native	41. 25 30. 30	19, 60 23, 23	39. 15 46. 47
Total	40. 26	19.93	39. 81
orth Central States: Native	45, 90 42, 95	12.51 17.83	41.59 39.22
Total	44.64	14.77	40.59
outh Central States: Native	45. 67 33. 51	22.10 17.01	32. 23 49. 48
Total	43.74	21, 29	34. 97
estern States: Native		3. 44 4. 56	12. 84 15. 67
Total	82.19	3.87	13.94

Table 13 – Fewer than 20% of all families reported reported a deficit in earnings compared to costs.

AND GENERAL NATIVITY.	DIVISIONS
Geographical division and general nativity.	Average income of husbands.
forth Atlantic States: Native	\$638.14 594.56
Total	618.00
outh Atlantic States: Native Foreign	
Total	557.79
Foreign.	
Total	631.84
outh Central States: Native	
Total	572.03
Vestern States: Native	828. 13 759. 65
Total	801, 24

Table 15 – Average income of husbands was \$550-650 per year.