

Almshouses of Bartholomeus Hospital in Nineteenth Century Utrecht

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Introduction

I like to introduce myself with this subject. My name is Corrie Verstoep; and I teach at the Applied University Utrecht at the Institute of Social Work. I studied social and economic History at the University of Utrecht. Four years ago I started to do research for an elderly care centre in my neighbourhood, called the Bartholomeus Hospital, in the city of Utrecht. The hospital had an amount of unorganized archives, and they asked me to make an exhibition about the 600 year history of the hospital as an elderly care centre. Meanwhile the hospital was undergoing a big reconstruction: on last 24 of August was the new centre and the exhibition opened.

My main field of research is the history of the healthcare of elderly people during the nineteenth and twentieth century. Within the field of poor relief and welfare, the Foundation Bartholomeus Hospital is a typical example of private charity, taking care, on their terms, of several other charitable foundations.

The hospital has a long history. As far as is known, in 1367 it was founded by an unknown citizen, and was at that time called the Apollonia Guesthouse, a guesthouse for travellers. In 1378 the guesthouse was adopted by Willem van Abcoude and rededicated to Saint Bartholomew. Hence it became known as the Bartholomeus Hospital. In 1407 Van Abcoude made up a formal letter of foundation and prescribed that in future the hospital was to concentrate on care for sick, elderly, poor people. It has retained this function ever since. The board of administrators of the Bartholomeus Hospital still has the responsibility of supervising the social goals of the foundations and their financial integrity.

Utrecht counted eventually nine hospitals, which in 1817 were united – by Royal Decree of 27 March 1817 – under one board of governors. At the same time all foundations of almshouses were brought administratively under this new board, which went henceforth with the name *College van Regenten van de Vereenigde Gods- en gasthuizen*; College of Regents of the United God- and Guesthouses (to translate it literally). The College was to keep office at the Bartholomeus Hospital (henceforth BH). Over the following years, elderly inmates of other hospitals were gradually concentrated in the BH.

As said, several foundations of *Godskameren* (or God's chambers) and several other funds for the poor were put under supervision of the new College. It is important to note here, that in Utrecht the chambers have had the common name *vrijwoningen* -literally free houses- houses free of rent. In order to advise this College of regents committees were formed out of the available regents, such as a Almshouses Committee, a Hospital Committee and later on also a Land Committee. These commissions advised the board how to organize the newly founded general (academic) hospital, how to run the almshouses and how efficiently to capitalize the growing moveable and unmoveable goods.

In this paper I'll focus on the almshouses –*vrijwoningen*- under the care of the College of regents. I'll first give an overview of the general housing situation in Utrecht after 1817, after which the almshouses – founded by different religious denominations – are introduced. By examining the living conditions of the inhabitants in almshouses, I hope to get an answer to the question in what way the housing policy of the College can be regarded as a safety valve for the (lower) middle class in the nineteenth century. An important source for this is the Report of the Almshouses Committee. This report is quite reliable because one of the authors was the city of Utrecht's chief archivist, Samuel Muller. He was also member of the College of Regents (1897-1919) and a warm advocate for a housing care system as an important intervention to improve daily life.

In the report the situation of almshouses has been described. The commission advised the College how to improve the almshouses as to allow a more hygienic way of living conditions. Following this report they initiated a new housing Policy. The descriptions of living situations in the report are vividly and precise, and gives an insight into the conditions in these Utrecht almshouses at the end of the nineteenth century: their living conditions, the mentality of the inmates, their selection and the way in which inmates tried to bend the rules into their favour.

In order to delineate the (lower) middle class of nineteenth-century Utrecht, I follow the distinction made by the historian Piet 't Hart in his overview *Leven in Utrecht, 1850-1914*. He speaks of *onvermogenden* (destitute) and *minvermogenden* (less well-off). Both groups are vulnerable in a certain way. The destitute consists of those largely or completely dependent of charity: orphans, widows, the handicapped, the chronically ill and the elderly. The less well-off consisted of labourers and small independents, who were economically vulnerable largely through unemployment or the loss of purchasing power.¹

Almshouses in the City of Utrecht

In Utrecht's medieval history, almshouses are rather obscure, according to historian Llewellyn Bogaers. In her book *Aards, betrokken en zelfbewust. De verwevenheid tussen cultuur en religie in katholiek Utrecht, 1300-1600* can be read, that the scarce written evidence shows that institutionalized housing projects for the elderly already existed in the late fourteenth century (3 foundations/13 *cameren*, small houses). This process continued in the fifteenth century on a slighter larger scale (5 foundations/51 *cameren*), and throughout the sixteenth century on a larger scale (at least 15 new foundations/c. 200 *cameren*). All these almshouses were situated on private property, often in the backyard of the founder's house. Bogaers explains that visual and archival evidence indicates that housing projects for the elderly poor existed on a larger scale than is currently recognized. Nearly all these lodging activities came from private initiative.²

The *vrijwoningen, kameren* or chambers free of rent, were built of old in Utrecht in an alley, on a street or a small square. Usually, two adjacent chambers mirror each other exactly. The shape of an almshouse-in-court, such as exists in many cities in Holland, and in which case the complex consists of a closed block with a central inner terrain, hardly exists in Utrecht. As said, *vrijwoningen* or *godskameren* ('chambers to express God's will'), are nearly always founded by private persons and can be found in the sources from the middle of the fourteenth century onwards. The Utrecht the almshouse *fiwesisterkameren*, founded by a lady called Alijdt in 1375, are presumably the eldest complex of the Netherlands.³

To the complex of almshouses, sometimes a larger building was attached, such as a gate or regent chamber. In this part of the complex the board of regents would meet and discuss the almshouse affairs. Depending on the wishes of the founders, the administration was either entrusted to an independent foundation (as was the case with the *Pallaeskameren*) or to a larger private foundation (thus the *Godskameren Jan van Campen* were run by the Leeuwenberch Hospital) or with the Chamber of Almoners (which was the case with the *Gronsveltkameren*).⁴

The archivist Samuel Muller collected in his *Geschiedenis der Fundatiën, beheerd door het College van Regenten der Vereenigde Gods-en Gasthuizen te Utrecht* all letters of foundation of the nine hospitals of Utrecht and all foundations of almshouses still in existence in the 19th century, including some other charitable funds. I summarize here from his

¹ 't Hart, p.136

² Bogaers, deel III –Armenzorg om Godswil p.497-579; bijlage 12- tabel 4, p. 865

³ de Kam, p.20

⁴ de Bruin ea., p.78

findings. The *Fundatie van Johan Croonkijn*, founded in 1397, was placed under the supervision of the St. Barbara and St. Laurens Hospital. The Bartolomeus Hospital was entrusted with the administration of the *Sionscameren* (1439) and *de kamers van de Heyligen Lande* (1469). The Leeuwenberch Hospital was entrusted with the administration of the *Godskameren van Jan van Campen* (1574) and *de kamers in den hof van het gasthuis Leeuwenberch*. The *Armen Noodhulp*, founded in 1496, was entrusted with the foundations *Zuylenscameren* (1591), *de fundatie van Aartsbisschop Schenck* (1582) and the *fundatiën van Jhr. Aalbert Proeys e.a tot uitdeling van brood* (distribution of bread) *en de fundatiën van Gerrit Jansz. van der Meer e.a. tot het uitdelen van kleding* (distribution of cloths). The St. Job's Hospital was entrusted with the administration of the *tractament van den Smeermeester* (1562; a medical office). The St. Catharina Hospital was entrusted with the administration of a *preuve*, which was formed by the merging of two earlier foundations.⁵ Appendix I contains the list of the six foundations of almshouses which were administrated by the College of Regents in the 19th century. The total consisted of more than 40 individual units.⁶

The *Mieropskameren* (1583) on the Springweg have a different administrative history. At first this foundation was administrated by the St. Elisabeth Hospital, later they were placed under the supervision of the foundation *Het Everard Zoudenbalch Huis*, and since 1968 they are entrusted to the *Utrechts Monumentenfonds*.⁷ As this complex did not fall under the domain of the College of Regents, this foundation is not included here, as were several others. In the course of the centuries in the city of Utrecht more foundations of almshouses took place. These I'll leave out here.

In the course of the 17th century new foundations were added. The foundation letter of the *Gronsveltkameren* (1652) stipulated that the houses should be inhabited by all denominations. In the 19th century the division was: two places for Dutch Reformed, two places for Roman Catholics and later two for Old Catholics. It appears that the founder was at pains to prevent religious exclusiveness in his foundation. Also the *Bijerskameren* (1594) was known as a mixed foundation, where elderly of Protestant and Catholic denomination were housed and enjoyed annual doles of a mud of wheat, 20 pounds of cheese and 10 bags of peat. Despite the religious stipulations, in his overview of Utrecht almshouses Wagenaar in 1913 included both complexes in the section on almshouses with a Protestant signature, although he does remark on the liberal policy with regard to selecting the inmates.⁸

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, outside the former city moat new complexes of almshouses were built. These relatively young foundations, such as the *Stevens fundatie* (1860), the *Zimmerman Stichting* (1880), the *Stichting der familie van Metelerkamp* (1844) or the *Vereniging tot hulp van Protestantse weduwen* (1872) were also private foundations, but with a clear religious signature (see Appendix 3). All of these four foundations explicitly state that inmates must be selected from the adherents of the founders' faith, such as Protestant artisans in the *Stevensfundatie* or protestants in general (*Stichting der familie Metelerkamp*) or widows of this signature as with *de Vereniging tot hulp van protestantse weduwen*. The *Zimmerman Stichting* offered free housing to artisans with a family (preferably a great number of children), provided they were members of the Lutheran congregation. In 1895 Utrecht counted about 140 almshouses (i.e. individual units) of a Protestant signature.⁹

⁵ Muller, 1900, p. 107-253

⁶ Wagenaar p.30-38

⁷ Thoomes, p. 48

⁸ Wagenaar, p.14

⁹ ibidem, p.12-25

A Roman Catholic signature had the Speyaert van Woerdenshofje, also founded in the 19th century. Also the Old Catholics founded their own almshouses, as can be found in Appendix 2. The Catholics (Roman and Old) count about 75 almshouses in 1895.¹⁰

The history of the *Sionskameren*, founded in 1439, may illustrate the historical dimension of almshouses. Claes Govertsz., shoemaker, and his wife Clara Jan Hendricxdochter designated a complex of 15 cameren or chambers in their garden for habitation by poor people. He was a pious man, who had been on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and had returned with the honourable epithet of *Ridder Goidts*, Knight of God. Two houses on the Nieuwe Gracht (called 'in de Oudelle') fell to the foundation after their death. The income of the letting-out of the houses was destined for the maintenance of the 15 chambers. The administration was from the beginning entrusted to the Brotherhood of the St. Bartholomeus Hospital. The founder gave his foundation the Biblical name of Sion, and the names of the 15 chambers are 'Trinity', 'Josef', 'Maria' and then, consecutively, the names of the 12 apostles. The capital of 200 Rhenish guilders was destined for distribution. Afterwards the foundation was given bequests and donations by wealthy burghers, in order to support the work of the *Sionskameren*.¹¹

The founder had stipulated that each chamber could house only 1 man or 1 woman or 1 couple over the age of 50 year. If an extra person was living there, 15 five cent pieces had to be paid to cover the extra costs of maintenance. All goods of the inmates were to fall to the foundation after their death. Doles in the shape of fuel, food or money were at first well organized by the founder, but these provisions were vulnerable and usually dependent on the development of the capital.¹²

In the 17th century the foundation suffered from financial problems, presumably caused by maladministration.¹³ In 1639 both houses on the Nieuwe Gracht were sold, and by demolishing 3 of the 15 chambers the garden was enlarged. The three chambers were rebuilt at the end of the court, but separate from the others. Nevertheless the foundation continued to be plagued by financial deficits. In order to pay for repairs in 1741 the doles are temporarily reduced and rent was charged for the chambers. These measures were turned back in 1787, but the chambers were mortgaged. In the course of the 19th century the foundation administration was transferred to the Bartholomeus Hospital.¹⁴

Utrecht and the Social Situation in the Nineteenth Century

In his *Koninkrijk vol sloppen. Achterbuurten en vuil in de 19^e eeuw* historian Auke van der Woud describes life in the steadily growing cities of the 19th century Netherlands. By using vivid descriptions Van der Woud treats with infrastructure, houses and living conditions, leases and rack-renters, indecency and immorality, institutions of credit and pawnshops. His analysis can be summed up in the following quotation: '*the indecent life was inherent to the spatial structure, in the architecture of the slums and alleys*'.¹⁵ Small, defective housing brought diseases, primarily caused by a lack of space and air, defective physical hygiene and bad nutrition. Contemporaries were aware of this, and in the 19th century physicians, social workers and hygienists registered the medical topography of the cities and brought it under the attention of the governments, Van der Woud states.¹⁶

A similar description of lamentable housing conditions can be applied to Utrecht.

¹⁰ ibidem, p. 25-30

¹¹ Wagenaar, p.9-12

¹² Muller, 1923, p. 67

¹³ Bogaers, p.566

¹⁴ Muller, 1900, p. 120-135

¹⁵ '*Het onfatsoenlijke leven zat in de ruimtelijke structuur, in de architectuur van de sloppen en stegen opgesloten*'.

¹⁶ van der Woud, p 168 e.v.

A lack of sound sanitation, delapidation of barely ventilated houses became ever more visible in neighbourhoods where the number of inhabitants rose. Demographic pressure on the housing market, which did not produce enough new houses, caused a rapid increase of concerns over public health and hygiene in the course of the 19th century. The number of inhabitants increases relatively quick in the districts A and B (inside the City Moat and south east of the old city. Especially in these neighbourhoods most complexes of historical, old almshouses are situated. The more well-to-do mostly move away to newly built houses on the edges of the city. It seems that in the course of the 19th century residential segregation between rich and poor occurs at the level of the neighbourhood. That also explains why during the cholera epidemics of the 1830s, 1840s and 1870s most victims fall in the poor neighbourhoods. An example is the Gasthuissteeg where during the cholera-epidemic of 1866 in nearly every household someone was infected and died.¹⁷

Vrijwoningen are part of the traditional system of poor relief. The question of who determined poor relief and which percentage of the Utrecht population depended on poor relief should be treated here. The spread of the expenditure on poor relief measured in the years 1879 and 1907 calls up the image of rising expenditure by municipal authorities (from 43 to 52 percent); the ecclesiastical expenditure drops from 54 to 42 percent, and the expenditure of private foundations rises from 3 to 6 percent. 't Hart claims that in the years 1851-1912 on average about 21 percent of the Utrecht population was dependent of poor relief.¹⁸

The authorities did relatively little on poor relief, and then only what was highly necessary. The care for the poor and destitute remained in the 19th century a case of ecclesiastical and private charity. For the year 1851 't Hart could make an overview of the occupations of those who were supported. In March 1851 circa 20.500 out of a total population of about 50.000 received poor relief. Artisans, labourers, domestics and serving personnel, day-labourers, packers, porters, carriers etc. are mentioned and at least some 1890 people belong to the destitute and are housed in institutions and orphanages. The Civic Poor Relief Administration (Burgerlijk Armbestuur) was responsible for 23 percent of the number of poor which was eligible for support. The Protestants looked after about 29 percent of the supported; the Roman Catholics looked after 42 percent of all supported. The Jewish community looked after 6 percent of the Utrecht poor.¹⁹

Bartholomeus Hospital

The newly formed College of Regents of 1817 was confronted by new challenges and ethical dilemma's. How far could one go in deviating from the goals and intentions of the founders, which, no matter how noble they are, were in practice no longer realistic. Could they deviate from the founders' wishes and make their own rules when it came to the destination and distribution and placing inmates in the almshouses? Over the centuries the administrators of almshouses had developed their own administrative practices. Sometimes it seems as if there had been deliberate manipulating of the original intentions. An example of this is that the new inmate had to pay 25 guilders to the person who awarded them the almshouse place, which was abolished by the College of Regents in 1818.²⁰ Another example is the exploitation deficit of the *Zuylenskameren*. That almshouse's capital for doles and for repairs of the houses dried up during the 19th century. The housing committee proposed in 1898 to the College to use the capital of the *Armen Noodhulp* (an important fund for distribution bread, cloths etc.to

¹⁷ Pietersma e.a., p. 358-363

¹⁸ 't Hart, p.149-151

¹⁹ ibidem, p.141

²⁰ ibidem, p.67

the poor population of the city) for the repairs of the *Zuylenskameren*. The *Armen Noodhulp* was well-provisioned, and repairing the houses after all was also beneficial to the poor.²¹

The stewards of the hospitals taken over in 1817 continued afterwards the runnig affairs of 'their almshouses'. Maintenance of the mostly centuries-old houses remained a point of concern in the 19th century. The College of Regents is continuously short of money; the houses are very old and run-down. To cope with the exploitationdeficits of the houses, they started to rent the better conditioned. The rents could then be used to renovate the bad conditioned houses. This policy however dit not work. Between the renters and those who were free of rent a disproportion emerged. The renters were dissatisfied and demanded a better maintenance of their house, for which they paid rent. They also demanded a greater say over the renovated houses, as that had been done with 'their money'. Those who were free of rent also increasingly were dissatisfied with the strict supervision by the regents. The inequality between both sorts of inmates led to many tensions, and the measure was turned back.²²

In 1830 all complexes of almshouses were insured against fire. That was also necessary, given the intensive use of the houses. Often in the attick stoves were used which might lead to dangerous situations. On the *Kroonstraat* the housing committee found the following situation in two houses: 'The one consists of a widow with three adult sons and one adult daughter, the other of a couple with two adult sons and two daughters, one of which is adult. One can imagine how these families are quartered in the houses: the attics, completely covered in paper, are divided by paper partitions in countless small rooms, where the sons work and largely sleep. Amidst all this paper gas burners have, and only with great difficulty our secretary succeeded two years ago in having placed a piece of tin plate over one of the burners, in order to protect the wall covering, spread over it horizontally but a foot higher'.²³ On closer scrutiny the family was found to generate enough income for a proper house and the committee advised to have the family moved.²⁴

Another recurrent problem was the dampness and lack of ventilation of the houses. People became ill as a consequence. The list of due repairs takes four pages. Bad ventilation, damp and stench are serious, as this case shows: 'In an especially damp chamber of the *Zuylenskameren* lives a handsome widow, who suffers from rheumatism of the joints, with one daughter, who looks after her, and a son. The physician has told her it is necessary that she move house, because the damp aggravates her complaint; moreover it is most desirable that she, who is hardly able to move anymore, sits outside on warm days, for which there is no opportunity in the *Zuylenscameren*'.²⁵

Supervision of compliance with the housing rules appears to be an important task of the College. The committee of almshouses notes in the report, that in the course of the centuries a 'natural' division of allotment by regents has grown. Inmates often arrange their

²¹ Rapport, p.8

²² ibidem, p.9

²³ *Het eene bestaat uit eene weduwe met drie volwassen zoons en eene volwassen dochter, het andere uit een echtpaar met twee volwassen zoons en twee dochters, waarvan een volwassen. Men kan zich voorstellen, hoe deze gezinnen in de huisjes ingekwartierd zijn: de zolders, geheel met papier beplakt, zijn door papieren schotten verdeeld in talrijke kleine hokjes, waar de zoons werken en grootendeels slapen. Tusschen al dit papier zijn gasvlammen aangebracht, en slechts met groote moeite is het onzen secretaris voor twee jaren gelukt te bewerken, dat boven een der vlammen een stuk blik werd aangebracht ter bescherming van het behangsel, dat een voet hooger horizontaal gespannen was.*

²⁴ ibidem, p. 21.

²⁵ ibidem, p.24 /bijlage: *In een bijzonder vochtig vertrek van de Zuylenskameren woont een knappe weduwe, die lijdt aan gewichtsrheumatiek, met eene dochter, die haar verpleegt en een zoon. De dokter heeft haar gezegd, dat zij noodzakelijk moest verhuizen, omdat de vocht hare kwaal verergert; bovendien is het zeer gewenscht, dat zij, die zich nauwelijks meer bewegen kan, bij warme dagen buiten zit, en daarvoor is in de Zuylenskameren geen gelegenheid.*

housing wishes with the one who has allotted them the house. In order to prevent arbitrariness and error of those administrators and the inmates, the committee in 1900 proposes that rules should be observed stricter. The new rules must be observed strictly by both parties, and subject of control by the overseer. The committee also proposes strict supervision of the repairs, so that repairs of broken windows, open floors, weak door locks, and the reduction of draughts and dusts really take place. The list of overdue repairs concerns 38 houses and is thus extensive. The inmates complain of a lax attitude of the board.²⁶

In the 1900 report the Committee also states that the ‘number of inmates frequently is much too high, sometimes exorbitantly so’.²⁷ The almshouses – usually meant for old people – often are inhabited by young families. One of the Sionskameren – one chamber and attic²⁸ – is inhabited by a family with five children. In another house they find a mother with her 39 year old son. Grazing examples of housing conditions keep occurring and are carefully reported. ‘A widow lived with three adult sons in the Sionskameren. The question arose whether it would not be desirable, to make also this family move, as a still healthy woman with three adult sons doesn’t need a vrijwoning and the Sionskameren are too small for four persons. But the eldest turned out to be dead; the other earns only about four guilders, the youngest (in temporary employment) five guilders. Moreover the widow has very bad eyesight and can’t work because of that; it appears therefore desirable to let the family stay there, given that the woman already lives there’.²⁹

A flowing through of growing child-rich families to larger accommodation is one of the recommendations, which requires knowledge about the composition of the family. Sometimes inmates have physical and/or mental handicaps, as illustrated by the example above and the following description. ‘The other family consists of an unemployed father, feeble of mind, with his wife and six children aged under thirteen, while the seventh is expected before long; they live together in two rooms and an attic; the old mother has moved recently and can’t be allowed to return. In the other family, a smith’s servant with his wife and eight children, the man earns 9,25 guilders (while the mother goes out working and the eldest invalid daughter looks after the children’).³⁰

The Committee proposes that both families be moved to new - to be built- almshouses, and advices to be strict to in-living children. Sons have to leave at 21 at the latest, and daughters already at the age of 18.

Correcting Living Behaviour

In the second half of the nineteenth century the steward and two representatives of the College of Regents kept a stricter supervision of the housing rules. Inmates who were extraordinarily sloppy and filthy, were given a warning, and if no improvement was apparent, the inmate might be extradited from his living quarters, because ‘it is useful to make some examples’.³¹

²⁶ ibidem, p.38 /bijlage

²⁷ ‘getal der inwonenden geregeld veel te hoog was, soms enkele malen exorbitant’.

²⁸ See Appendix IV for a drawing of such a house.

²⁹ ibidem, p.2; *Een weduwe woonde met drie volwassen zoons in de Sionskameren. De vraag rees, of het niet gewenst was, ook deze te doen vertrekken, daar eene nog krachtige vrouw met drie volwassen zoons geene vrijwoning schenen te behoeven en de Sionskameren te klein zijn voor vier personen. Doch de oudste bleek overleden; de andere verdient slechts ca. f 4,*

de jongste (tijdelijk in dienst) f 5. Bovendien ziet de weduwe zeer slecht en kan daarom niet werken; het schijnt dus gewenst, nu de vrouw eenmaal in de woning is, het gezin daar te laten blijven.

³⁰ ibidem, p.21; *Het andere gezin bestaat uit een werkeloozen vader, zwak van hoofd, met zijne vrouw en zes kinderen onder de dertien jaar, terwijl het zevende eerlang verwacht wordt; zij wonen samen in twee kamers en een zolder; de oude moeder is onlangs verhuist en mag niet terugkomen.*

In het andere gezin, een smidsknecht met zijne vrouw en 8 kinderen, verdient de man f 9,25 (terwijl de moeder uit werken gaat en de oudste gebrekkige dochter op de kinderen past).

³¹ ibidem, p.17; *het is nuttig enkele voorbeelden te stellen.*

This was for example the case where inmates did not show the expected behaviour, such in the following case of ‘overcrowding’ in combination with someone claiming the right of the strongest: ‘In the other family the eldest son is no longer accommodating: he demands the attick for himself alone and lets his parents sleep with two big daughters and an adult son in the room below.’³² The committee advised to extradite this family, as it supposedly earned too much – say between 18 and 25 guilders. The adult sons had already been ordered to leave before, but had refused to do so.

The interferences of the overseers with the inmates also allowed to register incapability as a consequence of illness and age. The Report notes several grazing cases of filthiness. ‘In the upper room of the impure backhouse in the Bergstraat lives one invalid old woman alone. With her was a little girl, a granddaughter, who for her grandmother’s sake sometimes did not go to school. It was extremely filthy there’.³³

Another example: ‘In the Schalkwijksteeg lives since many years an 82-year old man alone; he is supported with 90 cents and has to live from that. As the coming of your committee was announced, he, who normally never lets anyone in, had cleaned up a bit. Still it was dreadfully filthy: one could not recognize the colour of the Floor, the furniture was broken and paltry, the attick was full of indescribable junk. The man did not complain, and one can’t be too hard on him: he has children, but no one looks after him, and he is desperately poor’.³⁴

Yet another, last example shows how great age influences the ability to live independently: ‘In the Sionskameren lives another old woman, not very invalid, yet not able to keep her house clean: the chamber, renovated completely last year, was very filthy, and she excused herself for it by her great age’.³⁵

The committee proposed to the College to propose the above mentioned cases to the Deacony, for a place in the Old Men’s House. They noted that these people needed care and help, as they could not afford to pay a younger woman to care for them.³⁶

Selection of inmates

Also after 1817 the regents selected new inmates by taking turns, the sequence of which had been assigned by lot. This form of selection was vulnerable to abuse, as it created a personal bond between patron and beneficiary, which made possible the making of underhand agreements and arrangements. To all inmates of almshouses in 1818 – repeated in 1865 – a new code of behaviour was handed out. No man under 50 and no woman under 40 was allowed a place. In 1842 it was determined that a house could be given to a couple only after both had reached the required age. In 1899 it was determined also that the longest-living might always remain in the house after the death of the other. Furthermore it was determined,

³² *ibidem*, p.22-23; *In het andere gezin is de oudste zoon niet meer te gemoetkomend: hij verlangt den zolder en voor zich alleen en laat zijne ouders met twee grote dochters en een volwassen zoon in het kamertje beneden slapen.*

³³ *Op de bovenkamer van het onzuivere achterhuis in de Bergstraat woont eene gebrekkige oude vrouw alleen. Bij haar zat een klein meisje, een kleindochter, die om harentwil nu en dan de school verzuimde. Het was er zeer vuil.*

³⁴ *In de Schalkwijksteeg woont een 82 jarige man sedert jaren alleen; hij is bedeed met 90 cents en moet daarvan leven. De komst Uwer commissie was vooraf aangekondigd, en hij had daarom zijne woning, waarin hij anders nooit iemand toelaat, wat opgeknapt. Toch was het ijsingwekkend vuil: de kleur van de vloer was niet te herkennen, de meubels waren gebroken en haveloos, de zolder lag vol met niet te beschrijven rommel. De man klaagde niet, en men mag hem niet hard vallen; hij heeft kinderen, maar niemand ziet naar hem om, en hij is doodarm.*

³⁵ *In de Sionskameren woont een andere oude vrouw, niet zoo gebrekkig, maar toch ook niet in staat hare woning netjes te houden: de kamer, verleden jaar geheel opgeknapt, was zeer vuil en zij verontschuldigde zich met haren ouderdom.*

³⁶ *ibidem*, p.22-23

that children over 20 could not live with their parents: special permission could only be obtained from the regents.³⁷

Almshouses as poverty trap

By evaluating the Reports of the Housing Commission I hope to have answers to the question in which way the housing policy of the College can be regarded as a safety valve for the (lower) middle class in the nineteenth century. In the introduction I also intended to determine to which category of the (lower) middle class belonged the inmates.

On the basis of the many descriptions one can say in the first place that the inmates must be regarded as part of the Utrecht poor. It is remarkable that it concerns often older people living alone, sometimes women/widows with growing/adult children and/or families with young children of which the breadwinner is unemployed. Sometimes there is the added burden of a mental or physical handicap and/or disease of a family member. Families appear to be vulnerable in more than one way. Only rarely one person lives in one dwelling, and thus in accordance with housing regulations.

If a family earns a sufficient regular income, the right to free housing is disputed and the family extradited. Only in special cases, such as that of a strong handicap, a family was allowed to stay. My preliminary conclusion is that the inmates of the studied *vrijwoningen* are more often characteristic for the destitute rather than the less well-off.

I realize that researching the biographical data of the inmates would refine this image. It would also allow for establishing whether the almshouses with a religious signature drew a different kind of inmate, with a better social-economic background. The new foundations of the nineteenth century put strict conditions on inmates, and often the inmates had to pay a low rent. It is probable that inmates there were rather from the less well-off.

What was the policy of the College of Regents and what changed in that policy around 1900? The problem of how to maintain and repair the centuries-old dwellings and stop the dilapidation is a constant one. Lack of money of the almshouses funds lead to occasional financial support of the municipality. Old houses are then torn down and new ones built, such as was the case with the houses of the *fundatie van Croonkijn* (1397). That fund is used for building in 1862 – with financial support of the municipality - 17 new houses in the Kroonstraat.³⁸ New forms of sewerage and water supply bring high costs with them, which the College tries to allocate to the inmates. Usually these agreed to pay a share of the cost.

The College also discussed, at the turn of the century, how to deal with the discrepancy between the kind of housing and the number of inmates. Recommendations were compiled on the subject, and a number of solutions proposed.

Furthermore it discussed how it could increase its hold on the inmates of almshouses. The answer was sought in disciplining: rules, contracts and supervision were intensified, and (undesired) housing behaviour was judged critically. Dubious administrative habits were evaluated, as mentioned above.³⁹ More research to the working of housing allocation in the nineteenth century can give answers to the question how administrators acted.

The early 1900s concern for the living conditions in almshouses did not come alone. Had the government done little to assist poor and elderly people, shortly after 1900 there is a great change in social policy and social-economic thinking. The Housing Act of 1902 gave municipalities more opportunities to stimulate a more sustainable housing construction, on the one hand by setting up a system of credit for housing societies, on the other hand by creating the possibility to declare houses uninhabitable. Kernels of the welfare state are being laid with

³⁷ Muller, 1923, p.67

³⁸ Muller, 1900, p.115

³⁹ Rapport, p.40

far-reaching legislation on the field of health care, education and housing, such as the Accidents Act (1901), the Invalidity Act (1912), the Old Age Act (1912) and the Illness Act of 1930 – precursors of the later acts who build a welfare state, the Unemployment Act (1952), General Old Age Act (1956), the Handicapped Act (1959) and the General Support Act (1965).

Utrecht almshouses in the 20th century

The number of almshouses drops in the 20th century. In his *Hofjes in Utrecht* Thoomes mentions eight remaining complexes of almshouses founded in the 14th, 15th, 16th or 17th century. These eight complexes now represent the way in which one cared for the poor in the past and have become of monumental, cultural-historical importance in the Utrecht cityscape.⁴⁰ Living in them, for rent, became again popular in the 1960s and 1970s, when they were renovated and were given modern sanitation, electricity and gas, and sometimes an extension to the garden – although in one complex the toilet is still outside the house and still communal. This renovation process has placed living in these houses in a different light.

The *Sionskameren* however suffered another fate. In 1952 they were taken from the list of Utrecht monuments at the behest of the regents of the Bartholomeus Hospital. The maintenance costs were high and the College believed it was no longer possible to convert them to modern housing standards. The houses were declared uninhabitable by the municipality in 1955, sold in 1957 and partly demolished. On this spot stands now a bakery. Remains of the last houses lie in a garden, the owner of which, together with neighbours from the ABC-straat intends to restore the façade of the *Sionskameren* in its old glory.⁴¹

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⁴⁰ Thoomes, p.9

⁴¹ Mr Molenbeek, owner of the bakery on the former ground of *Sionskameren*, interview 17/7/2011

Appendix 1

Complexes of Almshouses in the city of Utrecht, without specific religious Signature, under supervision of *College van Regenten van de Vereenigde Gods-en Gasthuizen* (translated literally College of Regents the United God-and Guesthouses)

Source: C.W. Wagenaar, *Vrije Woningen in Utrecht, Utrecht 1913*

Name and amount of almshouses	Foundation/ Supervision	Criteria of Selection of Inmates	Adress	Year of Foundation
<p>Sionskameren 15 houses 2 burgher houses for rent</p> <p>1639 the big houses are sold/ 3 of the <i>vrijwoningen</i> have been demolished and rebuilt at the end of the garden</p> <p>Repairing the houses diminished the doles</p> <p>1741 the houses are rented; 1787 free rent again, but the doles of wood and peat stopped</p>	<p>Founded by Claes Govertsz., shoemaker / St.Bartholomeus Hospital housemaster is supervisor</p> <p>After 1822 the foundation of <i>Sionskameren</i> falls directly under financial supervision of Bartholomeus Hospital</p> <p>In 1957 it was sold, and partly demolished</p>	<p>1 woman of man off a couple; aged above 50years/ only an invalid could be living-in, but for rent he has to pay 15 cent pieces; all the belongings became property of the foundations (one could be dismissed of it after paying 35 cent pieces)</p>	<p>Nieuwe Gracht behind the big houses called 'in de Oudelle'</p>	1439
<p>Zuylenskameren, ca. 33 houses</p> <p>13 houses</p> <p>10 houses in 1836</p>	<p>Dirk van Zuylen , canon of the St. Pieter/ supervised by the Kapittel of St.Pieter</p> <p>1821 the administrations is by the municipality of the city of Utrecht</p> <p>1869 supervised by the board of Bartholomeus. Hospital</p>	<p>After 1817: between 2 to 7 persons , depending the seize of the house; unmarried persons of opposite gender –older than 14 years- were not allowed to sleep in the same room. Licence could be stopped if the family seize were not in balance with the eize of the house</p>	<p>Bergstraat</p> <p>Zuilensteeg</p>	1593
<p>Fundatie van Croonkijn 5 kameren in the garden/ burgher house was rented an this money was used for repairs</p>	<p>Foundation of Johan Croonkijn & his wifeKorstine Supervision by St.Barbara –en Laurens Hospital from 1397,</p>		<p>Behind Clarenburg</p>	1397

Expansion to <i>19 cameren</i>	5 cameren in de garden after 1817 the houses were bad and dilapidated 1862 the municipality helped and rebuilt the houses in the Kroonstaat; Supervisio rests at the College of Regents		17 <i>vrijwoningen</i> in Kroonstaat	1862
<i>Camers van Jan van Campen</i> 14 houses	Supervision Leeuwenberch Hospital After 1817 under supervision of College of Regents		Schalkwijkstraat In 1645 two houses were removed to Nieuwe Kamp	1574
<i>Convent van Arkel</i> 3 houses	Cloister of St. Anna	Originally sisters of Marienhage and sisters of the cloister Nazareth	Between small Eligensteeg and Prinsenhof Rebuilt in the Minstraat	<i>voor 1551</i>
<i>Camers van den Heiligen Lande</i> 6 houses	Supervised by St. Bartholomeus Hospital		Jufferstraat Rebuilt in the Minstraat	1496

Sloping written dates of foundation, see Bogaers, p. 865

Appendix 2

Complexes of Almshouses in the city of Utrecht, with Catholic Signature

Source: C.W. Wagenaar, *Vrije Woningen in Utrecht, Utrecht 1913*

Name and amount of almshouses	Foundation/ Supervision	Criteria of Selection of Inmates	Adress	Year of Foundation
A number of old <i>vrijwoningen</i>	RC Chamber of Almoners Private Foundation	Roman Catholic poor people, above the age of 60, they have no doles elsewhere; sometimes gifts come from the church	10 old ruined houses; behind the Plantsoen of the Herenstraat; echter uninhabitable; inmates moved to the RC. Old womenshome at the Maliesingel and to the old houseboat at Achter Clarenburg	Late Middle Ages
Gronsveltkameren	Chamber of Almoners	Twelve old women in 2 RC families 4 RC families	4 homes in ABC straat 2 Nic. Dwarsstraat 4 in Abr. Dolesteeg 2 Zakkendragersst.	
Bruntenhof 15 houses	Frederik Brunt Own foundation	Families of RC denomination with some children	Behind Lepenburg and Schalkwijkstraat	1621
Fundatie Pelt 1 house and 4 kameren	RC Poor Commitee	RC denomination	Oude Kamp	1717
Speyaert van Woerdenshoffje 16 houses		RC unmarried women or widows, 50 years old, no distribution elsewhere For a living 20 cents a week	Kerkstraat	1877
14 houses	Old Roman Catholic Chamber of Almoners	People from the Old RC community who needed help	12 Weteringstraat 2 in L. Roozendaal 2 Nic.Dwarsstr.	
St. Geertruida 10 houses	Old RC St. Geertruida parish	partly demolished for building the church; partly uninhabitable and demolished	Behind the wall of Willemsplantsoen	
O.R.K. Mariakerk 5 houses	Old RC Administrator of the Maria church	Administrator has the right to select inmates	Andreasstraat	

Appendix 3

Complexes of almshouses in the city of Utrecht, with Protestant Signature

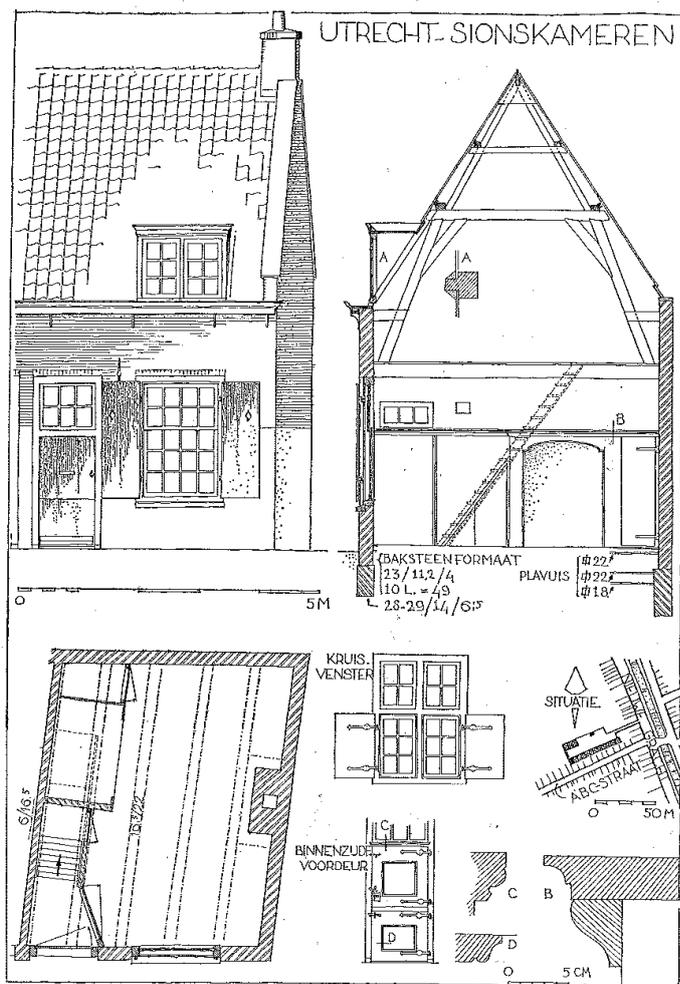
Source: C.W. Wagenaar, *Vrije Woningen in Utrecht, Utrecht 1913*

Name and amount of almshouses	Foundation/ Supervision	Criteria of Selection of Inmates	Adress	Year of Foundation
24 houses	Deacony of the Dutch Reformed church	Widows and sometimes a men of the congregation	Kruisdwarsstraat	19 ^e Century
<i>Breijerskameren</i> 11 houses Expanded with 10 houses	Ibidem	Inmates have to live in the quarter of the deacon	Witte vrouwensingel	16 ^e Century in 1749 expanded
8 houses	Ibidem	Deacon do the stipulating of wintergifts and doles	Gasthuissteeg	17 th century
1 house	Ibidem		Andreasstraat	
<i>Gronsveltkameren</i> 6 houses	ibidem	2 are for members of the Dutch Reformed church; 2 for Roman Catholics; 2 for Old RC.people	Nicolaasdwars straat	1652
<i>Stichting van Thomas van Nijkerken</i> 4 houses	Municipality of the city Utrecht	For couples without children of Dutch Reformed community. A benefit of 10 guilders 50 cents a year; distribution in the winter as potatoes, peat and weekly bread.	A.B.C straat	1556
Idem 1 house	Ibidem	Ibidem	Haagstraat	
<i>Fundatie Maria van Pallaes</i> 12 houses 3 houses 9 houses	ibidem	Small families or women, member of the Dutch Reformed community; distribution in kind (later 10 guilders)	Agnetenstraat Van Pallaesstraat Minstaat	Ca. 1650 1890 Ca. 1900
27 houses	Bhurger Orphan house of the Dutch Reformed church	Members of the Dutch Reformed church		
<i>Kamers van Jan van Goch</i> 11 houses	Ibidem (of origin <i>Armen Noodhulp</i>)	Members of the Dutch Reformed church; 10 guilders a year extra	Zakkendragers steeg	1560
10 houses	Protestant churchwarden		5 Jacobikerkhof* 2 in Waterstraat 1 small houses in Jacobiekerksteeg	* 1863 built; from sale of houses in the Galecosteeg
<i>5 zusterkameren Juffrouw Alijt</i>	ibidem	Poor people who need distribution	Waterstraat	1375 in 1894 restauration
3 houses	Poor-Relief of St.Jacob	The poolmaster gives them to needy Dutch Reformed members	Pauwstraat	

Name and amount of almshouses	Foundation/ Supervision	Criteria of Selection of Inmates	Adress	Year of Foundation
<i>Rijndersstichting</i> 14 houses	Dutch Reformed church	Widows or women with or without children; age 50 years old	Roggestraat	1910
<i>Fundatie Eleemosynae van Oudmunster</i> 36 kameren grown to 67 houses	Municipality of the city Utrecht with help from the steward of eleemosynier 120 <i>preuves</i> each of 10,80 guilders	Families of various protestant communities; in the winters there is distribution of potatoes, peat, bread and groceries	22 in Groenestraat 28 in Burgstraat 6 in Haagstraat 1 in Helmstraat 6 in Weistraat 4 in Pallaesstraat	Late Middle Ages
<i>Fundatie der familie van Metelerskamp</i> 11 houses	Committe of supervision	Decent protestant people; small families; 5 cents for rent a week for distribution of groceries	9 aan Nieuwekamp 2 in het Achterom	1844
<i>Stevensfundatie</i> 50 houses	Supervisor of the foundation	Married protestant atisans; with or without children; after the man' death the women must leave the house	Terrain of former Holy Cross Hospital; Kruisstraat	1860
<i>Vereniging tot hulp van protestante weduwen</i>	Supervices of the foundation Registration between the the 10-100 guilders	Members are allowed to ask somebody; 30 cents a week to do repairs; Widows with 3 children is the maximum	Oudwijkerveld Straat; Known as the protestants widowsalmshouse	1872
<i>Zimmerman Fundatie der Lutherse gemeente</i> 10 houses 4 houses	Evangelic Lutheran Congregation	Artisans/handicrafmen with families; of the Lutherain Community; with a big seize of children; no distribution; f 1,25 a week for rent	Gildstraat Jasmijnstraat	1880 Later built
<i>Margarethenhof</i> 20 kameren; 18 houses	Originally supervised by Sint Matthias and Margaretha Guesthouse of 1367	Inmates of protestant of catholic origin; widow or old women; Inmates get 8 guilders a year; potatoes and coal	Jansveld are 9 demolished and in the Haagstraat 7 new ones; 3 new houses are bought near the Amsterdamse straat weg	Late Middle Ages 1913 built
<i>Beijerskameren</i> 16 houses	Testemony of Adriaen Beyer and Alet Jansdochter de Bruin	Old people, of protestant or catholic signature; <i>preuve</i> a mud of wheat, 20 pound cheese, 10 bags of peat	Lange Nieuwstraat	1594

Sloping written dates of foundation, see Bogaers, p. 865

Appendix 4 Ground-plan and Architecture of *Sionskameren*



The 15 *vrijwoningen* named *Sionskameren* are probably built in the first half of the 15th century. As far as we know –the sources are scarce and have hiatus- the buildings are renewed around 1650.

The remake in the 17th century gave the houses the performance as on the map above. Bricks with the seize of 23/11,2/4 cm formed the walls. Behind the front door there is a small hall, from where a quit steep stairs went to the garret and a door to the room. Under the stairs is a chest and behind that a cupboard. At the other site of the room is the chimney. In the centuries after some small changes were realized like a wooden floor, a bigger chimney, a wooden ceiling and window frame rods instead of leaded windows etc.

In 1849 two toilet blocks were built for communal use. The name Claas Cassepoortgen, named after the founder Claes Govertsz Cas, was the common name of this complex of houses.

Source: Ir. C.L. Temminck Groll, *Restauraties en Vondsten in Utrecht*, in: *Maandblad Oud Utrecht*, 33 (1960), p. 55-58