

SENATE...No. 127.

Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

IN SENATE, March 27, 1861.

The Joint Special Committee, to whom were referred the Petitions of the Massachusetts Medical Society, the Boston Sanitary Association, and the American Statistical Association, asking for the establishment of a Board of Health and of Vital Statistics; and the annual Abstract of Births, Marriages and Deaths, for the year 1859,

R E P O R T:

They have carefully examined the memorial of the Sanitary Association, and the statements of the other petitioners, and heard the evidence of the committees of these societies and of others familiar with the matter, and have become convinced, that the prayer of the petitioners is a reasonable one, and that it is for the interest of the State and the people that it should be granted.

A State Board of Health, having a general supervision of the sanitary and vital condition of the people, watching over their interests in these respects, as the Boards of Education and of Agriculture watch over the interests committed to their care, with a competent secretary or executive officer devoted to the observation of the general phenomena of disease and mortality, to the study of their causes and to searching out the means of

preventing the deterioration of life, will afford the people most important safeguards against many of the destructive agencies that waste human health and strength.

The execution of the law for the Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths, (Gen. Stat. chap. 21,) now devolves upon the secretary of the Commonwealth. But from the great pressure of business in his office, the work is not performed nor even superintended by the secretary or by the higher officers in that department, and from the necessity of the case, it is delegated to subordinate agents and clerks, who are not endowed, and cannot act with the authority and intelligence that are needful for the perfect execution of this work. Moreover, as these agents and clerks, as well as their principal, the secretary himself, may be frequently changed, and as there have been eight who have presided in that office within the eighteen years since this law was established and a still greater variety of agents have had charge of this work, it has varied with the ideas of those who performed it. Consequently the reports of births, marriages and deaths, have been prepared upon no permanent and uniform plan; the tabulation of the facts, the deductions that have been drawn from them, are not the same through all the years. In ten successive reports only about one-quarter, seventeen out of sixty-five, of the statements of facts or combinations of facts appear in all. These varying documents are therefore less valuable to the legislature and less instructive to the people, than those which are prepared on some fixed and well-digested plan, in which the facts are analyzed and presented in a similar manner, and for a similar purpose, and in which the deductions become annually more reliable with the increasing experience and extent of their basis.

The administration of the census law (Gen. Stat. chap. 20) is also assigned to the secretary of State, but from the reasons before stated, the work, including both the plan and the execution, is delegated to subordinate and unpracticed agents. It is, therefore, liable to the same imperfection as that of the registry law. This is shown in the census of 1855, in which the very important distinction of the sexes was omitted, and the work thereby deprived of one of its most valuable elements, as a statistical document. This omission is the more to be regretted, as the legislature of 1860 ordered, that "the secretary prepare an

abstract of the returns of the national census of” that “year, in printed form, similar to the abstract of the census of the Commonwealth taken in the year 1855.” Of course, unless the legislature amend the order, or the secretary transcend the authority given him for this purpose, the error of the census of 1855 will be repeated in that of 1860, and the State of Massachusetts will send forth another report of its population with no distinction of the sexes.

These scientific labors and responsibilities, the registry of births, marriages and deaths, the enumeration of the people, the digestion of the returns, the preparation of the reports, and obtaining from them deductions and lessons in regard to the law of population and mortality, to the value of life in various conditions and circumstances, and to the influence of these upon human health and longevity, can safely and profitably be entrusted only to practiced and competent officers: and it is apparent to your Committee, that all this could be done more profitably for the people and more satisfactory to the government, and the results made more useful to the world and honorable to the State, by an officer, selected for his fitness for, and devotion to, the work, and also at a cost but little, if any greater, than is now paid for the same purposes and with less satisfactory results.

The visitation of all the public charitable institutions of the State seems to your Committee to be a very valuable feature of the plan. Here, in the aggregate, is a vast interest, both to the Commonwealth and the people, the amount of which few even of the legislature comprehend, and none have an opportunity to see and to know it as a whole, or to learn the extent or sum of the cost of human suffering, and of money that is involved in it. The sick in body and in mind, the defective in sense and in intellect, who are provided for, in whole or in part, directly or indirectly, by the Commonwealth, are very properly distributed among fourteen different public institutions; and the knowledge of their condition comes to the legislature, if it comes at all, through as many different reports. Those reports are also made on different plans, and represent different points in respect to the inmates of their several institutions, and the government has no means of collating, comparing, or of consolidating these facts, and looking at them as a whole, and providing for them accord-

ingly. There is no agent of the government, no board, no single eye appointed or authorized to examine these, to gather the facts and present them in one body to the legislature. The only approach to this is the annual visitation of the Committee of Charitable Institutions. But, from the very nature of their position, their renewal in each year, and their consequent want of experience and familiarity with the subjects of their inquiry, and from the absorbing nature of their occupations here, during the session of the general court, they cannot give to those institutions the attentions which their importance demands, nor obtain all the information which the government needs, nor present it in a form the most available for the members of the legislature.

These matters are attended to by other governments, in the way here recommended, and with a success that is considered very gratifying. Most foreign nations have statistical, charitable, and scientific departments connected with their administrations. The English Board of Health, Board of Lunacy, and Registry Office, perform the duties herein prescribed. The French Board of Charities and Superintendents of Hospitals and of Statistics do the same for France. And these Governments receive a good return in this systematic care of the poor, the weak and the suffering, as well as the healthy, among their people.

Believing, then, that the Board of Health and Vital Statistics, with their competent executive officer or secretary, will perform all those duties and labors more acceptably to the legislature and profitably to the people, and that their work will, in its progress and its results, be a matter of both private and public economy, your Committee propose the following Bill.

T. W. CARTER,
A. N. HUNT,

Senate.

S. M. QUINCY,
W. B. CALHOUN,
T. W. MASON,
J. L. S. THOMPSON,
A. H. BULLOCK,

House.

Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In the Year One Thousand Eight Hundred and Sixty-One.

AN ACT

To establish a Board of Health and Vital Statistics in Massachusetts.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives, in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:—

1 SECT. 1. The governor, with the advice and consent
2 of the council, shall appoint seven persons, of whom
3 one at least shall be a lawyer, and two shall be phy-
4 sicians, and one an architect or engineer, who together
5 with the governor and lieutenant-governor, shall con-
6 stitute the Board of Health and Vital Statistics. The
7 persons so appointed shall hold their offices for
8 seven years, provided that the term of office of the
9 seven first named shall be so arranged that one shall
10 terminate at the end of each year, and their places be
11 filled by the governor and council; but any one may
12 be reappointed.

1 SECT. 2. The board shall take cognizance of the
2 interests of health and life among the citizens of this
3 Commonwealth. They shall make sanitary investiga-
4 tions and inquiries in respect to the people, the causes
5 of disease, and especially of epidemics and the sources
6 of mortality and the effects of localities, employments,
7 conditions and circumstances, on the public health ;
8 and they shall gather such information in respect to
9 these matters as they may deem proper, and diffuse it
10 among the people. They shall advise the government
11 in regard to the location of any public institutions.
12 They shall, in the month of January, make report to
13 the legislature of their doings, investigations, discove-
14 ries and suggestions during the year ending December
15 thirty-one next preceding.

1 SECT. 3. The members of the board shall meet at
2 the state house, at least once in a quarter, and as
3 much oftener as may be deemed expedient. No mem-
4 ber thereof shall receive compensation from the State
5 except for personal expenses, when engaged in the
6 duties of the board.

1 SECT. 4. They shall elect a secretary either from,
2 or out of, their own body ; but when elected, he shall
3 be a member of the board and their executive officer ;
4 he shall perform and superintend the work prescribed
5 in this law, and such other duties as the board may
6 require. He shall receive from the treasury, in quar-
7 terly payments, an annual salary of two thousand dol-
8 lars, and his necessary travelling expenses incurred in
9 the performance of official duties, after they have been
10 audited and approved by the board ; and all postages and

11 other necessary expenses arising in his office, shall be
12 paid out of the treasury in the same manner as those
13 in the different departments of the government.

1 SECT. 5. Under the direction of the board, the
2 secretary shall have charge of the execution of the law
3 for the registry of births, marriages and deaths, [Gen-
4 eral Statutes, chapter twenty-one,]; he shall receive
5 and digest the returns and prepare the annual report,
6 and perform the duties in respect to this law, that are
7 now enjoined upon and performed by the secretary of
8 the Commonwealth.

1 SECT. 6. The board shall superintend the decen-
2 nial census, [General Statutes, chapter twenty,] and
3 the secretary, under their direction, shall receive and
4 digest the returns and prepare the decennial report.

1 SECT. 7. He shall, under the direction of the legis-
2 lature, digest the statistics and facts of the national
3 census in respect to Massachusetts.

1 SECT. 8. For the purposes specified in the fifth,
2 sixth, and seventh sections of this act, he shall have
3 such clerical aid as may be necessary, as is now
4 allowed to the secretary of the Commonwealth.

1 SECT. 9. Under the direction of the board, the
2 secretary shall visit and examine all the medical char-
3 itable institutions, that are authorized, incorporated or
4 established by the legislature, or which receive any
5 part of their support from the treasury of the Com-
6 monwealth, including the hospitals, asylums, and

7 county receptacles, and other public depositories of
8 the insane, the hospital at Rainsford Island, the hos-
9 pital departments of the State almshouses, the Massa-
10 chusetts General Hospital, the Eye and Ear Infirmary,
11 the institutions for the blind, the school for idiots,
12 the asylum for the deaf and dumb, at Hartford, Con-
13 necticut, and so forth. He shall recommend plans of
14 reports of the vital statistics of these institutions, which
15 shall be uniform for the insane and for the sick. He
16 shall make annual report to the legislature, as to the
17 condition of these institutions, and make such state-
18 ments in regard to their inmates as may be advan-
19 tageous to the government.