



JOHN AUGUSTUS

John Augustus, the “Father of Probation,” is recognized as the first true probation officer. Augustus was born in Woburn, Massachusetts, in 1785. In 1841, Augustus attended

police court to bail out a “common drunkard,” the first probationer. The offender was ordered to appear in court three weeks later for sentencing. He returned to court a sober man, accompanied by Augustus. To the astonishment of all in attendance, his appearance and demeanor had dramatically changed.

Augustus thus began an 18-year career as a volunteer probation officer. Not all of the offenders helped by Augustus were alcohol abusers, nor were all prospective probationers taken under his wing. Close attention was paid to evaluating whether or not a candidate would likely prove to be a successful subject for probation. The offender’s character, age, and the people, places, and things apt to influence him or her were all considered.

Augustus was subsequently credited with founding the investigations process, one of three main concepts of modern probation, the other two being intake and supervision. Augustus, who kept detailed notes on his activities, was also the first to apply the term “probation” to his method of treating offenders.



By 1858, Augustus had provided bail for 1,946 men and women. Reportedly, only 10 of this number forfeited their bond, a remarkable accomplishment when measured against any standard. His reformer’s zeal and dogged persistence won him the opposition of certain segments of Boston society as well as the devotion and aid of many Boston philanthropists and organizations. The first probation statute, enacted in Massachusetts shortly after his death in 1859, was widely attributed to his efforts.