

The Seneca County Poorhouse

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May 2012

You have probably heard someone say something like, “Be careful with your spending or you’ll end up in the poorhouse.” For many years, there actually were poorhouses to which people went to live to work-off their debts.

History of Poorhouses Before 1820

The existence of poorhouses can be traced back to England “Poor Laws” of 1601 which required local parishes to assist the indigent. In 1652, the Dutch Reformed Church in Beverwijck (now Albany) established the first poorhouse in New Netherland. New York State’s first municipal poorhouse was established in New York City in 1700. By the early 1700s some paupers were living in church poorhouses, but most stayed in private residences, leading to the term “boarding out” in which church or city leaders paid the homeowners rent for the paupers to stay in their home. At the end of their required term of work, the pauper would typically then be paid a sum of money. By 1820 poorhouses existed in many communities. Some communities also had “almshouses” which were institutional-style buildings set away from residents and businesses and offered workshops, schools, and farms in an effort to rehabilitate the poor.

In 1824, New York completed a survey of housing and relief programs for the poor. This was the first inclusive survey of the poor ever done in the United States. The report showed that paupers were often mistreated and neglected and that the existing multiple forms of relief for the poor was not cost effective. Later that year, the state legislature passed the County Poorhouse Act which required all counties (except Oneida and Ulster) to build and manage almshouses. The law was premised on the ideology that institutional housing, combined with work and education programs, would rehabilitate and benefit paupers.¹

Establishment of the Seneca County Poor House

As the communities in Seneca County grew, it became more difficult to handle such matters on an individual basis. The board of supervisors decided to coordinate the welfare program as a joint effort.

The first meeting of the superintendents of the poor of Seneca County was held on February 3, 1830 at the Waterloo Hotel, kept by L. Lynch. The appointed superintendents were: Dr. Anthony D. Schuyler of Romulus, Dr. Claudius C. Coan of Ovid-Lodi, William Hoskins of Seneca Falls, William Larzelere of Fayette, and Joel W. Bacon of Waterloo. William Larzelere was asked to look for a suitable building to rent that would accommodate the poor. The other members of the committee were asked to visit the poor houses of the adjoining counties and then report back on their programs.

They met again on February 26, at the inn of William Hoskins. William Larzelere informed the other members of the committee that he was not able to find a suitable house that could be rented, but said that John P. Silvers offered to sell a house and land on Lots 7 and 16 in Romulus (Fayette). Other offers of land were received from other area farmers: Peter Dey, Alexander Morison, Daniel Rhoades and George McAlister. The superintendents, also, voted to hire Zephaniah Lewis as keeper of the poor house. His salary was to be \$350 a year. For this, Mr.

Lewis was to provide a good span of horses, a wagon, one good cow and the labor of himself, his wife, his sixteen-year-old son and eleven-year-old daughter.

The committee met again the next day at the inn of Benjamin Lemmon in Varick after visiting the farms that had been offered for sale.

On March 8, they met at the inn of S. Wood in the village of Seneca Falls to discuss the various offers. Then at 6 a.m. the next morning, they met again at the inn and after considerable discussion, they decided they would make an offer for the Silver's and McAlister farms which adjoined each other.

They agreed to pay Silvers \$1,420 for the house and 36 acres which included seven acres of wheat on the ground. They offered George McAlister \$20 an acre for 65 adjoining acres excluding the winter grain. The offer was accepted, with the board of supervisors to take full possession of the premises on April 1.

The men again contacted Zephaniah Lewis and he agreed to come with his family to the farm beginning April 1. In the intermission his salary had been cut to \$325 a year. Before Lewis and his family could move in, some repairs had to be made to the building.

Dr. Samuel Elder of Waterloo was appointed physician and surgeon of the poor house. He would receive \$80 a year. He was to furnish the necessary medicine, visit the poor house twice a week at stated times and any other time he would be called by the keeper.

By April 9, the superintendents were meeting at the poor house. They planned to put an addition on the building but decided to delay it for a time. They were busy dealing with the litigation in the courts at the time to divide the county.

They did complete plans to remodel the upper story of the building which was just a garret at that time. They laid floors and divided the attic into separate rooms.

Early Rules and Regulations

Men, women and children who had been boarded out with families were moved to the farm. The first boy that was indentured was James T.M. Dutton who was bound to Benjamin Rial of Fayette as an apprentice to the blacksmithing business. Rial was to pay Dutton \$30 in cash at the expiration of his working term.

At the next meeting, the superintendents bound out two brothers and two sisters: Gordon and Curtis Needham; Loretta and Emily Gilbert.

If circumstances warranted it, some of the paupers still remained with individual families and the superintendents were also in charge of setting a cost for such allotments. Isaac S. Mills of Tyre had been boarding Eleanor Russell for \$1 a week. His allotment was cut to 75 cents. Clarissa Rogly was to be kept by her mother and her mother would receive 10 shillings per week.

In the meantime the superintendents issued a notice which was sent to all the town poormasters, urging them to send their paupers to the country poor house and to settle their final accounts.

Harris Usher was one of the overseers of the poor for Seneca Falls at that time; Ucal Howell for Lodi; Nathaniel Wakeman, Covert; Jacob Hathaway, Varick; and, Nathaniel French, Junius. At the next meeting the superintendents settled with the remaining overseers: Theodore Chapin of Seneca Falls; Abraham Sebring, Ovid; Daniel W. Bostwick and Thomas Pitcher, Waterloo; John Sayre, John Williams, Romulus; and William Sweet, Fayette.

Rules and regulations for the alms house were established by the superintendents and approved by the judges of the county court on April 9, 1830. Among the rules set for the keeper were:

- He shall register the names of each and every person sent to the poor house with age, occupation, town from which sent and time of their stay.
- He shall admit no persons of a suspicious appearance to visit the house nor shall he suffer any person to present to any pauper, money or any other article unless it shall pass through his hands.
- He shall cause the children to be taught to read and write and shall attend strictly to their morals.
- He shall see that the proper attention is paid to the sick; that the kitchen and rooms are kept clean and in good order; that the meals are prepared punctually; that provisions and wood are used with economy; and, that nothing is wasted.
- He may confine any pauper for ill-conduct at his discretion, but not for a longer term than 48 hours, with the direction of at least one of the superintendents.
- He shall on Sunday mornings before breakfast have a change of clothes given to each pauper and immediately after, all the dirty clothes shall be collected and early in the week shall be washed and returned to their proper places.
- He shall on Sunday morning after breakfast, cause the paupers to be assembled in the convenient room and have a portion of the Sacred Scriptures and a suitable sermon read and such other religious exercise as he may think proper.

Rules for the paupers included:

- At the first ringing of the bell in the morning, every person, the sick and those in confinement excluded, must immediately rise, dress, wash and report to the work assigned to them.
- The bell will be rung just before noon meal, when all will leave their work, wash their hands and faces and be ready for the ringing of the second bell, when they will repair to the eating rooms and take such seats as are assigned them by the keeper. They must strictly observe decency, silence and good order. A reasonable time will be allowed by the keeper at each meal. A bell will again be rung when every person must immediately repair to the work assigned them.
- Those guilty of intoxication, disorderly conduct, profane language, theft or waste shall be severely punished.
- In all cases of solitary confinement the prisoners shall be barred from seeing or conversing with any person except the keeper or the persons employed by him. They shall be subject to the severest privations and their food shall consist solely of bread and water. Any person who shall converse with one thus confined shall be punished by like confinement.
- On the Sabbath at the ringing of the bell for the purpose of assembling for religious instructions, every person shall appear dressed in clean apparel and shall behave with decency and sobriety. No noise or disturbance shall be made by anyone in any part of the house and the day shall be strictly observed as a Holy Day without recreation or unnecessary labor. Any persons willfully absenting themselves from the place of meeting or violating the Sabbath shall be subject to severe punishment. No visitor shall have

admission to the house on the Sabbath without the permission of one of the superintendents.

Early Years of Operation

Apparently Zephaniah Lewis did quite well with his salary of \$325 per year. On October 7, 1830, when the superintendents met to prepare a report for the board of supervisors, they borrowed \$150 from Lewis to complete repairs to the building. They agreed to repay him by the first of April, with interest.

At the end of the first year of operation they re-appointed Lewis as keeper and Dr. Elder as physician. Elder was to receive \$100 for his year's service. He resigned at the end of the year and Dr. Stephen B. Gay was named in his place.

The first black orphan to be indentured was George Pierce who went to James W. Boomer and was to receive \$1000 when he completed his term.

After two years of operation the poor house appeared to be a busy place, as indicated by the minutes of the superintendents. The keeper was instructed to sink a new well on the west side of the house and to hire the work out by the day so the cost would be less, for the benefit of the supervisors.

Dr. Gay was re-appointed for a year but his salary was cut to \$70. The same day the superintendents cut the doctor's salary, they dismissed 12 people from the poor house, naming only D. Stowell.

Reports of the activities of the poor house had to be sent to the state. In October 1837, the superintendents had to prepare an audit of the poor masters and justices of the towns for the state, under a new law.

That year an additional 25 acres of land was purchased. In March 1833, Dr. Jesse Fifield was named poor house doctor at a salary of \$75 a year, to be paid quarterly.

Zephaniah Lewis was re-appointed keeper in 1834. Apparently he had managed to save most of his salary. He stipulated that he should have time off to superintend the building of his new house. He was allowed to take three weeks, providing it did not interfere with his work at the poor house. His son Harry, now an adult, was hired to labor on the farm at a salary of \$96 a year.

Dr. Silas Keeler of Seneca Falls was appointed physician, surgeon and man-midwife. Claudius Coan still continued as superintendent but the other superintendents were replaced by Amherst Childs and Charles M. Baker.

Although nothing was recorded in the minutes relating to deaths or the specific number of cases, it was noted that at the October 1, 1834 meeting the superintendents settled with nurses they had hired during a cholera outbreak.

Childs and Baker were replaced by Harris Usher of Seneca Falls and Franklin Gage of Waterloo; Zephaniah Lewis left as keeper and Alpheus A. Baldwin took his place at the same salary and the same provisions. In November 1837, the superintendents authorized the erecting of several new buildings, including a wash house and a wooden cistern.

A Report to the State Gives Us Insight into the Nature of the Building

In February 1838, the State Assembly sent a questionnaire asking for information regarding the poor house. The answers of the board gives one a good picture of what the building was like in those days.

It was originally built for a private dwelling and that section was about 18 years old. Another section was added about eight years before. It was made of wood and stone.

The building was 46 by 42 feet, with a wing 22 by 26 feet. It was two stories high with a basement. The basement was divided into six sections: a dining room, sitting room, two cells and storage cellars.

The main floor had a sitting and lodging room for the women, another sitting room also used for a lying-in room for expectant mothers, and a room for sitting or nursing. There was also a sleeping room for the men, and a bedroom and parlor for the keeper and his family. In the wing there were more rooms for the keeper.

The second floor had a number of lodging rooms and two cells for females. These were five by nine feet in size. One of the rooms was used by the physician when he visited the house and another was where the superintendents met for their meetings.

In total there were five rooms used by the keeper and his family and 15 rooms and four cells for the paupers. The bed rooms had from two to seven beds, according to size. A husband and wife were allowed to share a bedroom. The greatest number of inhabitants at the home during the year was 80, but the average was about 50.

There were usually a few inhabitants who could be classified as idiots and a few as lunatics. The superintendents noted that the idiots were quite placid and were allowed to be with the other people. During a period of violence, the lunatics were locked in cells but were released when they became lucid, but they could only be with people of their own sex.

Asked about women in confinement, the men wrote, "From the first organization of our poor house, we have been very cautious to provide at all times, proper accommodations for females during their lying-in, have always observed that delicacy in their treatment during their confinement and recovery which humanity and decency dictate."

That State Report Also Gives Us Insight into the Treatment of the Paupers

According to the superintendents, the general health of the inhabitants was good and not many became sick during the year. They felt that the poor house was large enough to take care of all that needed help in the county.

Baldwin remained as keeper until 1838 when he was replaced by Edward Crane. The salary remained at \$325 a year with the same stipulations.

In December 1838, the superintendents met with the poor house committee of the board of supervisors and it was agreed that some repairs and additions would be made to the property. They would build a new oven and cistern; fence in a yard so the idiots and lunatics could have the benefit of fresh air and exercise. The building with the oven was to be built large enough so an upstairs room could be used as a school room.

In reading the superintendents minutes one has the feeling that they and the county strived to provide decent and adequate care for the poor and homeless. Yet, one can't help wonder what caused the superintendents to pass the following resolution on March 27, 1840: "Resolved, that no pauper shall enter into any political strife while in the poor house; nor shall they attend any political meeting or any political election whatever." One can't help wonder if the politicians of the day saw a way to get a few more votes.

The Next Several Years

William Spader took over as keeper in 1841. He only remained one year and was replaced by Samuel Garlick. For the next number of years there was little in the minute book except the paying of bills and the occasional changing of superintendents. Dr. Claudius C. Coan, who was one of the first superintendents, continued to serve until 1846. It is possible there was a

political change that year. During his terms of office, Dr. Coan rarely missed a meeting. Those he did miss were usually in February and the weather probably had a lot to do with his absence.

There is no record in the minute book or in the records of the board of supervisors to indicate that these men who served as superintendent of the county poor ever received any remuneration for their service. Dr. Coan's record of over 16 years of service; traveling from the Ovid-Lodi area to Fayette in all kinds of weather, certainly demonstrates his human concern for the poor and homeless of this county.

The superintendents of the county poor in 1850 were James Rorison, Peter C. Covert and Henry Feagles. That year, they bought seven acres of woods from Gary V. Sackett. The records, still filed in the record book, noted they would have five years in which to cut down any timber; the only use of the land was the wood. They were to put the brush in piles and if any limbs were broken over the line, they were to chop and cord the wood and pay \$1 a cord for all they broke down.

A committee comprised of John D. Coe and Richard R. Steele reported to the board of supervisors at the November 25, 1850, meeting on their study of poor house construction. They had visited poor houses in other counties and examined the building in Seneca County. They suggested it would be better to build a new structure instead of trying to fix up the existing building.

The next year Charles K. Watkins, Joseph Gambee and Silas Keller were appointed an impartial committee to study the need of a new building. Their report was very graphic. They stated, "The dilapidated, rickety state of the building is so badly arranged that any attempt to rebuild, reconstruct or improve it would be useless. It must entirely fail in its main object of preserving the health and comfort of the ill-fated being reduced to the hard necessity of becoming its suffering inmates. There is no fit rooms for the accommodation of the sick, none comfortable for the well and the whole establishment, without any fault of its officers, is less inviting than the common jails of this land." The committee recommended the construction of a new building, or if not that, the abandonment of the present one.

At the March 2, 1852 meeting, five bids were presented to the board of supervisors. They were from: Henry C. Vreeland, Burton & Savage; Gibbs & Eggleston; Stephen W. Childs and Franklin B. & Obadiah B. Latham. The original bids as they were presented to the board have also been preserved.

Although the specifications had stated that the estimates should be for a stone or brick building, Henry Vreeland's plans were for a wood house. He did not have a complete estimate of what it would cost but he offered to superintend the work for \$2 a day; plane all the lumber with the machine at 30 cents per hundred feet surface and would do all the slitting with buzz saw at \$1 per thousand feet in length. The county was to furnish men to work free of charge. He said, "All the men I should have to hire I should charge you the same that I have to pay per boy. \$2 per day. I think you will find it a great saving to have your work done by machinery, sat at least 25 percent."

The estimate submitted by Burton & Savage for building the poor house according to plan was \$8,400; Stephen Childs would build it of brick for \$8,200, of stone for \$9,200; Gibbs & Eggleston's price was \$7,499.

The Latham Brothers of Seneca Falls were the ones who got the contract. Their bid was, for brick, \$7,395; for stone, \$7,249. The Latham Brothers, notable builders of their day who built the stone mills in Seneca Falls and a number of other buildings throughout the state, got the contract for building the poor house because they submitted the lowest bid.²

A quarry on the property provided the limestone that was used for the walls, the lintels and stills, the water table, and large entablature. The new structure was completed in 1853. There was a Federal-style doorway that included sidelights and a transom. Like the original structure it replaced, there was a main building and a side wing to the east. There was a wide porch that stretched across the front.³ As was suggested at the time of construction, the structure was built so sturdily that it would last for generations.



This late 1920 picture shows the wide front porch, as well as the large sign that graced the front façade of the County Home for many years.

Recent History

The institutional system for the poor began to decline in the 1920s as social work became a profession, and both national and state laws, such as worker’s compensation laws, state pension laws, and unemployment and health insurance laws, were passed. Almshouses were crowded during the Great Depression, but by the late 1930s, mainly because of New Deal legislation, the majority of the poor lived in their own homes and received public assistance. Although never politically abolished, poorhouses were nonexistent by the 1950s.⁴

Approximately 1970, the former poor house building was remodeled and used by the county’s Department of Social Services until it moved into the new county office building in December 1989.⁵ On June 18, 1999, the property was purchased by Greystone Enterprises LLC, with Jonathan Buchwald as the managing partner.⁶ The house was converted into 8 apartments.⁷ The “pauper” graveyard back of the house is still owned by the county.⁸

Today we have other ways of “rehabilitating” the poor rather than sending them to the poorhouse. For many generations, however, the poorhouse was a real possibility.

¹ “almshouses and poorhouses,” *The Encyclopedia of New York State*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005

² Betty Auten, article in her Seneca County History newsletter, December 1984.

³ Edith Delavan, *Landmarks of Seneca County, New York*, Ithaca, NY: Cayuga Press, 1984, p 133.

⁴ “almshouses and poorhouses”

⁵ Information supplied by Charles Schillaci, Commissioner of Human Services for Seneca County

⁶ Deeds search in the Seneca County Clerk’s Office on 5-1-2012.

⁷ Information supplied by Jon Buchwald

⁸ Charles Schillaci