

Poorhouses in America

By Judith Landes



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“Poorhouses in America”: was delivered to the Winchester Torch Club on July 7, 2018.

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Once I built a railroad, I made it run, made it race against time.

Once I built a railroad, now it's done. Brother, can you spare a dime?

Once I built a tower, up to the sun, brick and rivet, and lime;

Once I built a tower, now it's done. Brother, can you spare a dime?

—“Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” by E.Y. Harburg and Jay Gorney (1931)

Little can be taken for granted in our government these days. What some call “entitlements” are being threatened; by 2030, some say, Social Security and Medicare will run out (Miller). The number of homeless people has risen to record numbers (Weber and Mulvihill). How many of our leaders honestly believe in decent and compassionate care for those who struggle?

A look at the past may be in order. What did we do before social security? Did it work? Did we provide good care for those who were in jeopardy? What did it mean to care for the poor?

When I was a teenager, my two sisters and I loved shopping. One night, at dinner, my father proclaimed, “if this spending is not controlled, we will all be in the poorhouse.” Playing the board game Monopoly, one occasionally picked the card that read, “Go to

the poorhouse.” But few of us understand the reality that once lay behind these phrases.

Millions of Americans spent time in poorhouses. Calamity Jane, Babe Ruth, Annie Sullivan, Annie Oakley, Charlie Chaplin, Henry Stanley and James Michener are among the Americans who lived in a poorhouse or workhouse, some as adults and some as children.¹ It was said that only the wealthy in society had no fear of winding up in a poorhouse (Katz 211). Those who lived in poorhouses were often given terrible labels: “lazy,” “good-for-nothing,” “paupers,” “indolent,” “beggars,” and “unworthy poor,” among other names.

The concept of poorhouses came from Europe, where they had existed since feudal times. In early times in the United States, the poor and sick were taken care of by churches and charities. The first poorhouse was reported to be in Jamestown in 1622 (McCarthy). The next, the Boston Almshouse, was in use in 1660, followed decades later in 1735 by the Boston Workhouse Act (Wagner, *Poorhouse*, 152). Towns would provide those in financial distress with products, such as food, through town suppliers. This kind of aid provided to those in their homes was referred to as “outdoor relief” (Wagner, “Poor Relief”). The poor were sometimes provided for by boarding them out to work

on farms for other people; in some cases, this meant auctioning a person off to the highest bidder.

In early America, poorhouses were designed to enforce discipline (Wagner, *Poorhouse*, 19). “Spirituous liquors,” disorderly conduct, and profane language were forcefully regulated. The severest of punishments were dealt to one who would bring or assist in bringing liquor into the house. There would be a stay in solitary confinement with only bread and water for a stay of up to two weeks. Time would increase with a second offense. Solitary confinement was deemed necessary to keeping order in the house (Wagner, *Poorhouse*, 40-45).

Some poorhouses were organized to be degrading to residents (Katz 95). Some persons entering a poorhouse were labeled “deserving”: widows, children, the elderly, the sick and those with disabilities. The “undeserving” category consisted of able-bodied adults who were not working, “foreigners” and those who were judged morally deviant (Wagner, “Poor Relief,” 52) Residents were expected to participate in the work of the farm or at other labors. This never seemed to work, as many were too old or too weak or uncooperative.

As an institution, the poorhouse was a collection of contradictions. They were to be shelters to care for the poor—but also a way to keep the poor from applying for relief. The poorhouse was voluntary, and many entered due to the threat of starvation, but for many the

shelters became penal prisons, those with mental illness faring the worst (Katz 25). Represented as a kind of charity, poorhouses were at the same time a source of private profit. Towns often spent more money supporting them than it would take to provide other kinds of relief, and it was suspected that much of the money was used for the payment of fees to justices, overseers, lawyers, and constables.

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From the very beginning, poorhouses, also known as almshouses, workhouses, county homes, city homes or poor farms, were unpopular with the rest of the citizenry (Wagner, *Poorhouse*, 6). The towns seemed to show little interest in what was going on with the walls. Once a person entered a poorhouse, they became almost a kind of non-person, out of sight, out of mind. Even families turned their backs, making few visits; indeed, some had entered the poorhouse because their families refused to care for them. Children

were also residents of poorhouses; the 1910 census showed that “more than 110,000 were living in asylums across the country. They were labeled ‘dependent, neglected and/or delinquent’” (Katz 91). By the end of the nineteenth century, most of these children had been relocated into what were called “orphan asylums,” even though an amazing number had living parents (Katz 52). A 1910 study of 985 widows showed that 15% of their children under the age of fourteen were in some kind of “substitute care” (Moehling 206).

* * *

Poorhouses began to change in the late 1800s due to political pressure, the growth of political machines (especially in urban areas among immigrants), the rise of labor unions, and socialist organizing (Wagner, *Poorhouse*, 97). Veterans of the Civil War were the first to be granted pensions, and when the depression of 1893 occurred, many cities and towns provided public works for the unemployed. A number of states were able to pass “mothers’ pensions” given to mothers of good moral character so that they would not have to abandon their children and go to the poorhouse (Wagner, *Poorhouse*, 9).

Even though changes came, some old attitudes persisted. In 1910, the superintendent of the Rockingham County Farm, New Hampshire, wrote the following: “our mission is to furnish everything comfortable for inmates, kind caring for the sick, but in no way to encourage indolence and

pauperism and fill the institution with people too lazy to care for themselves” (qtd. in Wagner, *Poorhouse*, 39). A 1937 letter from a county commissioner to a relief recipient in Rockingham County indicated that “if you do not ‘snap out of it’ and get to working and paying your rent, my next call on you will be with a police officer and will take your family to the county farm. The state of New Hampshire will place your children. A word to the wise is sufficient” (qtd. in Wagner, *Poorhouse*, 99). Even in the twentieth century, those who oversaw the poorhouses were quick to judge the residents in ways reminiscent of Dickens villains.

On the other hand, poorhouses were not all alike, and some even made a positive impact. James Michener’s *The Fires of Spring*, a partly autobiographical novel, draws on his own experiences growing up in the poorhouse in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. “As long as he could remember,” writes Michener of his protagonist, David, “he had lived in the poorhouse with his Aunt Reba. She was in charge of the women’s building [...]” (6). Aunt Reba was cruel both psychologically and physically, Michener describing her as an “ugly, unloving witch” (6). At the age of ten, however, David “was moved from the women’s building into a room of his own on the long hall where he met the most interesting men in the world” (7). The old men took David under their wings, and these times were some of the most wonderful of his life. From Old Daniel, he learned that “one of the nicest things about the poorhouse” was “that a man

could lie his heart out, could tell fantastic fables of all the things he had dreamed of and never accomplished” (8). Furthermore, the old men were always interested in his schooling. David found that math was easy and that English was hard, referring to it as “sissy stuff,” but one of the men told him that almost everything worthwhile was sissy stuff. One of them tells him:

You were meant to read all the books, David. To study wonderful things. You will wander about the world and see kings and maybe even talk to presidents. You’ll ride on ships and airplanes. You’ll see the deserts and mountains and trees so tall you cannot reach the top. If you study hard, David, all things will come to pass. (9)

Though without educations themselves, these men encouraged him not to quit after middle school, but to attend high school. Michener not only completed high school, but was also awarded a scholarship to Swarthmore College, where he excelled. Later in life he and his wife took in needy children and raised them.

* * *

In Frederick County, Virginia, there is a poorhouse on Poorhouse Road. The registration form to the national register of historic places describes it as “the oldest and best-preserved such structure in Virginia” (Odell and Salmon).

During the colonial period, the Church of England cared for the

poor through various parishes of Virginia. The vestries used part of the money that was collected from parishioners to provide for the poor, either directly or as a form of relief. In May 1755, the House of Burgesses authorized parishes to establish poor houses. Thirty years later, after the Revolution, the Virginia general assembly required that each county create a committee called the overseers of the poor, which would take over the church’s responsibility. The Virginia assembly required that the parishes sell the rectors’ farmlands (at that time, each Virginia parish had a house on a farm that was set aside for use by the rector) and apply that money to the care of the poor.

The original Frederick County poorhouse, operated in partnership with Winchester, was built in 1797 and located at what was then the edge of Winchester and is now the intersection of Fairmont Avenue and Piccadilly Street. A new poorhouse was constructed in 1819-20, at which time the poor were moved to the new building. Lemuel Bent was appointed clerk of overseers of the poor in Frederick County and Winchester and was required to issue a report to the state auditor on the conditions of the poor.

[...] the number of Paupers has increased in greater proportion than the population. The causes of this increase, is believed in some measure to be, the introduction of more expensive and luxurious habits of living among thriving and affluent portion of the community, which the poorer classes too

frequently endeavor to imitate thereby acquiring habits of idleness and intemperence [*sic*], bringing on the inevitable consequences, poverty and ruin to themselves and their families. (qtd. in O'Dell and Salmon)

Bent's suggestions included a set of "ordinances, rules and by-laws" to be used by the manager to maintain discipline, including the confining of "unruly, disorderly, or perverse" inmates to a "dark room" and a diet of bread and water. Rules were enforced against "feigning" sickness or lameness in order to escape, as well as begging (O'Dell and Salmon).

The Frederick County poorhouse population was placed at fifty-five or sixty in 1820. According to an 1850 census, there were forty-one inmates: thirty-two white residents and nine black residents, with seventeen males and twenty-four females. By 1900, number in the poorhouse were dramatically decreased, which was most likely due to an increase in home care and the construction of institutions for those with mental illness. By 1926, only nine people remained at the farm (O'Dell and Salmon).

The Frederick County poorhouse remained open until 1947. By 1968, when the farm was purchased by Fruit Hill Orchards, just one Virginia poorhouse remained open, in Shenandoah County. Known as a farm and almshouse and run by the Shenandoah Alliance for Shelter, it was used as a homeless shelter.

Two years ago, it caught fire and burned to the ground (O'Dell and Salmon).

* * *

The end of the poorhouse era has not been achieved. We just call what we do by different names. Springing from poorhouses were such institutions as nursing homes, old age homes, respite facilities, maternity and lying in hospitals, and homes for pregnant women. There are a reported 554,000 homeless people in the United States (Weber and Mulvihill). There are an estimated 2.2 million in jails and prisons (Gramlich). We have for-profit nursing homes, which are not regulated to the extent that they should be. It is apparent that the poorhouse concept is alive and well. Unless we have political, economical, and social changes, we will continue as a country that ignores what is in front of our eyes.

In 2016, Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* reported that people are in jails because they cannot pay their court fines and quoted a source who said, "it is 100% true that we have debtors' prisons." It happened in 1820 and it is happening today.

Much has been written about poorhouses. Here is the last part of a poem written by American poet, Will Carleton, in 1871:

So they have shirked and
slighted me, an' shifted me
about--
So they have well nigh
sour'd me, an' wore my
old heart out;
But still I've born up pretty

well, an' wasn't much put
down.
Till Charley went to the
poor-master, an' put me on
the town.

Over the hill to the poor
house --- my child'rn dear,
goodbye!
Many a night I've watched
you when only God was
nigh;
And God'll judge between
us; but I will al'ays pray
That you shall never
suffer the half that I do
today. (Carleton)

As we read Carleton's words, we realize that the history of the past has not shown us a way to our future. Even now, our government is arguing over how to provide for those in need of assistance or who have paid into a system that may not be there when they need it.

To conclude: in 1957, a music group out of Philadelphia had a huge hit which was on top of the charts. A one-hit wonder by the Silhouettes, and still played by deejays today, it is entitled "Get a Job." It is interesting to note that the Silhouettes' follow-up recording was entitled "Heading for the Poorhouse."

NOTES

¹ Caryn James, "The Michener Phenomenon", *New York Times*, Sept 6, 1985. Retrieved July 12, 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/08/magazine/the-michener-phenomenon.html>; 'Ann Sullivan Macy', American Foundation for the Blind website. Retrieved July 12, 2019: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180402230158/http://www.afb.org/annesullivan/asmbiography.asp>; 'Historical Overview of the American

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² Back in 1785, the state assembly had stipulated that if the parish's Church of England rector was still alive, the sale of the attached land would take place only after his death (McCarthy); such was the case in Frederick County, so the farm was not sold until the incumbent rector's death in 1822, at which time the money from the sale was applied to the debt for the construction of the poorhouse (Odell and Salmon).

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