

Almshouses span many generations

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Town farm, town infirmary, poor farm, almshouse. These are all names for the same thing — the town owned and operated home (or farm) for citizens whose poverty made it impossible for them to care for themselves.

Chelmsford maintained such a place until 1942, when it was voted at a Special Town Meeting on July 23 of that year "to discontinue the operation of the Town Infirmary."

The selectmen were authorized to sell the land, buildings, farm equipment and furniture belonging to the town and located at the infirmary. The three remaining inmates were boarded at the Westford Infirmary at Chelmsford's expense.

At that time, the "almshouse" was located at 110 Billerica Rd. at the corner of Golden Cove Road.

In early days, neither the state nor the town would pay for the support of the poor. Funds were raised through private contributions or the indigent were turned over to private farms where they were expected to "earn their keep."

History tells us that in 1696-97, "the inhabitants are not willing to grant money to relieve the poor (relieve the poor) by way of rate (rate or tax) but promise to do it by a Contribution." Later the town paid local farmers who were willing to board and care for the poor.

The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



This policy gradually changed and a 120-acre farm with house and barn was purchased by the town in 1823 for a "workhouse." The house stood on the north side of Mill Road near where it crosses Turnpike Road.

When it burned in 1871, the inmates were transferred to the "Benjamin Adams House" at 171 Mill Rd. for about a year until the old "Manning Tavern" at 110 Billerica Rd. was secured.

Most of the inmates, having nowhere else to go, made this their permanent home, some for many years.

To take an example, the Infirmary Superintendent reported in 1910 a total of 12 residents. Although 10 of these had been guests of the town for seven years or less, one woman had been there since 1843, 67 years, and a man had arrived in 1882.

The net cost per week for each inmate in

1910 was \$1.77. The expense was kept to a minimum by raising much of the food and milk right on the farm and by selling the excess.

However, the poor farm was not just a place for the care of the indigent. In Chelmsford, at least, it served as the local lockup for temporarily holding those who were arrested by the constable.

It was also used as the temporary lodging of itinerants, several of whom appeared in town each year. In some cases, a meal and lodging was provided at the request of the wanderer while others who, perhaps, had already dined on the fruit or produce of Chelmsford farmers found temporary abode at the insistence of the local constabulary.

The town report of 1906 states that 260 people were lodged there during the preceding year.

By 1942, government-sponsored welfare programs were becoming well established so that most cases were handled as "outside relief." — i.e. those who received aid in the form of cash payments or food and necessities in kind but were not lodged in municipally-owned institutions. It was no longer feasible to maintain the Town Infirmary.

Times have certainly changed.

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