

HISTORY

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HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

OF THE AMERICAN POORHOUSE SYSTEM

HISTORY OF 19th CENTURY AMERICAN POORHOUSES

Special Features

[The Workhouse](#)

This is a wonderful website about the British poorhouse system

[The Victorian Poorhouse](#)

[Famous People in the Poorhouse](#)

[The Poorhouse in Literature](#)

[Poorhouses in the Middle Ages](#)

Socio/Political Overview

WHAT WERE POORHOUSES?

(often also called Poor Farms -- and several similar terms -- or referred to with the older term -- Almshouses)

Poorhouses were tax-supported residential institutions to which people were required to go if they could not support themselves. They were started as a method of providing a less expensive (to the taxpayers) alternative to what we would now days call "welfare" - what was called "outdoor relief" in those days. People requested help from the community Overseer of the Poor (sometimes also called a Poor Master) - an elected town official. If the need was great or likely to be long-term, they were sent to the poorhouse instead of being given relief while they continued to live independently. Sometimes they were sent there even if they had not requested help from the Overseer of the Poor. That was usually done when they were found guilty of begging in public, etc.

[One misconception should be cleared up here; they were **not** technically "debtors' prisons." Someone could owe a great deal of money, but if they could still provide themselves with the necessities for remaining independent they might avoid the poorhouse.]

BEFORE POORHOUSES

Prior to the establishment of poorhouses the problem of what to do with paupers in a community was dealt with in one of three ways:

1. **Outdoor Relief provided through an Overseer of the Poor:** When people fell upon hard times and members of their family, friends or members of their church congregations could not provide enough assistance to tide them over, they made application to an elected local official called the Overseer of the Poor. Within a budget of tax money, he might provide them with food, fuel, clothing, or even permission to get medical treatment to be paid out of tax funds.
2. **Auctioning off the Poor:** People who could not support themselves (and their families) were put up for bid at public auction. In an unusual type of auction, the pauper was sold to the *lowest*

bidder (the person who would agree to provide room and board for the lowest price) -- usually this was for a specific period of a year or so. The person who got the contract got the use of the labor of the pauper for free in return for feeding, clothing, housing and providing health care for the pauper and his/her family. This was actually a form of indentured servitude. It sounds a lot like slavery -- except that it was technically not for the pauper's entire lifetime. And it had many of the perils of slavery. The welfare of the paupers depended almost entirely upon the kindness and fairness of the bidder. If he was motivated only by a desire to make the maximum profit off the "use" of the pauper, then concern for "the bottom line" might result in the pauper being denied adequate food, or safe and comfortable shelter, or even necessary medical treatment. And there often was very little recourse for protection against abuse. (See scan of an authentic [record of an auction](#) in 1832 in Sandown NH.)

- 3. Contracting with someone in the community to care for Paupers:** In this situation the care of a group of paupers was delegated to the person(s) who would contract to provide care at, again, the lowest price. This system allowed the opportunity for somewhat better supervision as indicated in the terms of the contract -- which might specify what minimum standard of care must be provided and that community officers would do inspections, etc. There were still often the same opportunities for abuse that were noted above.

Note: In some cases (before state laws began to *require* the establishment of County Poorhouses) local communities had already discovered that a place to house paupers helped reduce the cost of poor relief. These **small town poorhouses** were the prototypes for the later state-required county poorhouses. Those earlier poorhouses often instituted the use of an adjacent farm on which the paupers could work to raise their own food, thus making the houses more self-sufficient (relying less on local tax funds). That is how the term "poor farm" came into being.

THE BEGINNING of the COUNTY POORHOUSE SYSTEM

During the second quarter of the 19th century, as the industrial revolution had its effect on the United States, the importation of the factory system from England was followed almost immediately by the full scale adoption of what seemed to be an inherent component of that system -- the Poorhouse System. These poorhouses were built with great optimism. They promised to be a much more efficient and cheaper way to provide relief to *paupers*. And there was a fervent popular belief that housing such people in institutions would provide the opportunity to reform them and cure them of the bad habits and character defects that were assumed to be the cause of their poverty.

[1824 LAW -- ESTABLISHING COUNTY POORHOUSES IN NY](#)

[INDENTURE BOND for 7 year old boy -- 1835](#)

[NEWSPAPER NOTICE -- Opening of a County Poorhouse -- 1827](#)

[ARTICLES OF VENDUE \(Terms of Auction\) of the POOR -- 1832](#)

[CORRESPONDENCE Between Towns Disputing Legal "Settlement" \(Residence\)](#)

[POORHOUSE RULES & REGULATIONS -- Orange County NY -- 1831](#)

THE DISILLUSIONMENT

By mid-century, people were beginning to question the success of the poorhouse movement. Investigations were launched to examine the conditions in poorhouses. They had proven to be much more expensive than had been anticipated. And they had not significantly reduced the numbers of the "unworthy poor" nor eliminated the need for "outdoor relief". [This was public assistance given to those living outside the poorhouses. It was given somewhat grudgingly to those considered to be (perhaps!) more "worthy" poor --who might only briefly and temporarily require assistance to procure food or fuel or clothing when they fell on very short-term hard times.]

THE CIVIL WAR

But the Civil War was the major preoccupation of American society during the third quarter of the century. Major systematic changes in social welfare policy had to await calmer times. Ironically, the faltering poorhouse system was sheltered from the impact of the poverty produced by the war itself. The war created widows and orphans; and it deprived elderly members of families of the support they might have had in their old age, had their sons and grandsons lived or remained able to work. While many looked forward to the time ... "*When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again*"... many soldiers limped home to be disabled for the rest of their lives. However, a relatively small proportion of these casualties of the war ever wound up living in poorhouses.

The poorhouses were spared this circumstance for two reasons. Special [laws](#) were passed requiring that any needed assistance to veterans and their families had to be provided as outdoor relief -- specifically prohibiting placement in the poorhouse. And the Civil War Pension Plan provided -- although belatedly and awkwardly and controversially -- for soldiers and their family members. (An entire [book](#) could be devoted to this -- and it has been!)

THE TRANSITION

By 1875, after the regulation of poorhouses in most states became the responsibility of the State Board of Charities, laws were passed prohibiting children from residing in poorhouses and removing mentally ill patients and others with special needs to more appropriate facilities.

The poorhouse population was even more narrowly defined during the twentieth century when social welfare legislation (Workman's Compensation, Unemployment benefits and Social Security) began to provide a rudimentary "safety net" for people who would previously have been pauperized by such circumstances. Eventually the poorhouses evolved almost exclusively into nursing homes for dependent elderly people. But poorhouses left orphanages, general hospitals and mental hospitals -- for which they had provided the prototype -- as their heritage.

[BOOKS & ARTICLES](#)

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[RECORDS by State](#)

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