

## **ALMSHOUSES IN MARYLAND**

Almshouses once served as the primary institutions for the housing and care of the poor and homeless. Few, however, realize that the blind, lame, chronically ill, epileptic, developmentally disabled and mentally ill also shared the same quarters. In addition to the resident population, the almshouse offered aid to the transient poor by providing a meal and temporary shelter. Such institutions first appeared in Colonial America during the 1660s. Maryland founded its initial almshouses in the 1760s, with most counties setting up their own during the nineteenth century. Though the demographics of the inhabitants changed over time, these institutions persisted until the 1960s when government assistance programs made them obsolete.

### **Pre-Almshouse Poor Relief**

During the Colonial period, poor relief in Maryland was coordinated on the individual county or local level. The **Levy Court** of each county supervised the payments for the care of the poor, the dependent and the mentally ill. Persons without family or relatives to provide care were boarded with community members. In certain cases, a direct payment allowed the poor to remain within their own homes.

### **Founding of Almshouses**

With a growing population, the need for assistance and the financial burden on the counties increased accordingly. In 1766 about forty percent of Worcester County's expenditures went for housing the poor in private homes. Almost one-seventh of the families in Anne Arundel County received aid by the late 1760's. In 1765, a bill was

proposed in the General Assembly to found institutions for the poor and “houses of correction” for the confinement of “vagabonds.” Legislation finally passed in 1768 to establish the first almshouses in Anne Arundel, Prince George’s, Worcester, Frederick and Charles counties.

Besides being places to aid the poor, these institutions served as a mechanism for social control by removing what the public considered undesirable persons from the greater community. The 1768 law gave unconditional power to the county's **Trustees of the Poor** “for ...setting the poor to work, and punishing vagrants, beggars, vagabonds and other offenders.” Inspired by a 1697 English law, the act stipulated that all almshouse residents must wear the letter "P" (for poor or “poorhouse”) on their clothing under the penalty of whipping. Authorities in Maryland (as elsewhere in America) sometimes arrested and placed homeless or unruly people they considered a “public nuisance” into their almshouse.

### **The Almshouse Setting**

Almshouses were often located on the outskirts of a town or a rural part of a county on farmland of considerable acreage. The farm employed and provided food for the almshouse inhabitants (called “inmates”). Some almshouses featured a workhouse, where certain residents might weave cloth, sew clothing, or perform other labor to help pay for their upkeep. During the late 1830s, several Eastern Shore almshouses planted stands of mulberry trees, as habitat for silk worms, so that the almshouse farm and its

residents might defray the cost of administration by harvesting raw silk. The Maryland climate ultimately proved hostile to the enterprise and it was abandoned.

The county Trustees of the Poor or a grand jury empowered by the county circuit court periodically examined the conditions of the almshouse. The 1874 founding of the **Maryland State Board of Health** led to the first regular state inspections. Officials during the 1890s found that almshouse conditions varied in the different counties. Generally speaking, more modest accommodations were found in the less wealthy counties. Yet, fancy brick facades often hid the same troubling circumstances inside. Lax administration characterized the sparsely furnished settings of most almshouses. Superintendents, often local farmers appointed through political influence, sometimes changed yearly. Inspections speak of the "almshouse diet", a subsistence diet of hominy or oatmeal as the daily fare for residents. A local doctor would call on an "as needed" basis only, with few medicines kept on the premises in case of sickness. Though most institutions in Maryland practiced racial segregation at this time, certain county almshouses did not bother due to the added expense of having two separate buildings.

### **Reform, Changing Demographics, and Decline**

Reform movements in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries helped to improve conditions and remove certain individuals from the almshouse setting. Children were transferred to orphanages. A protracted campaign of some thirty years by the **Maryland State Lunacy Commission** prompted the State Legislature to pass a law in 1910 to move the mentally ill into hospitals. Yet this left the developmentally disabled and epileptic

individuals to languish in the almshouses. From the 1920s onward, more and more of the almshouse inhabitants tended to be the elderly and the chronically ill. The number of residents declined starting in the 1950s with the founding of additional state hospitals and the extension of government assistance programs such as Social Security.

Almshouses as institutions, renamed the less offensive "county home" in the twentieth century, continued to operate in a few counties until the early 1960s. Some former almshouse buildings have been torn down; others still stand though little evidence of their past use remains. Baltimore County's almshouse presently houses the county historical society. One Eastern Shore almshouse serves today as a bed and breakfast.

Further Web Sites:

For another overview of poor relief and almshouses in Maryland visit:

<http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/mdmanual/18dhr/html/dhrf.html>

For more information on the Baltimore Almshouse visit:

<http://www.mdhistoryonline.net/mdmedicine/cfm/hospitalinfo.cfm?id=12>

An exhibition tracing the removal of the mentally ill from almshouses is located here:

<http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/speccol/sc5400/sc5492/html/almshouse.html>

Further Reading:

Carroll, Douglas G. and Blanche D. Coll. "The Baltimore Almshouse: An Early History." Maryland Historical Magazine, V. 66, 1, (Summer 1971): 135-152.

Harvey Katherine A. "Practicing Medicine at the Baltimore Almshouse, 1828-1850." Maryland Historical Magazine, V. 74, 3, (Fall 1979): 223-37.

Schoeberlein, Robert W. "The Beginning of Mental Health Care Reform in Maryland, 1908-1910." Maryland Historical Magazine, V. 96, 4, (Winter 2001): 439-474.