

Springfield's Care of the Poor

During the summer of 2006, Fred and Terry Davis donated some genealogy information and old town reports to the Springfield Historical Society. One town report dated back to 1835, and Fred wondered if it was the oldest. It very well might be. I have yet to find an older one. In this town report and others that followed, there was quite an accounting of the town's poor. Fred thought that it might make an interesting story. The words poor and pauper were used interchangeably throughout the documents.

In 1832, the selectmen in Springfield chose a committee to consider buying a farm to support the poor. Prior to this time, a poor person, such as Sally Robie in 1822, was supported by the lowest bidder usually for a year. "...voted to vendue, by the week, for a year; should she live so long, while in health, and when sick the town to pay the Doctor's bill and was struck to John Gilman, Jr. at twenty five cents per week." (Chas. McDaniel p. 329)

By May 5, 1836 the selectmen voted to buy a town farm. In 1837, James Noyes was chosen to be the first agent to manage the Poor Farm. The selectmen would buy the stock. On August 1st...Noyes declined; was elected agent. [whether he wanted to or not?] In 1830, the selectmen voted to pay Eliakum Putney twenty-five dollars extra for his services to the Town Farm.

The selectmen decided to sell the Town Farm and all personal property on March 20, 1852. Chosen to do so were Samuel Quimby and D.N. Adams. The "town paupers" would be kept by the lowest bidder. This must have been very unsatisfactory because by 1857, the town was once again considering the purchase of a Town Farm and stock. The committee was William Washburn and James McDaniel. D. N. Adams was the collector.

The second attempt at a Town Farm existed until 1872. The Town Farm was located at the top of Town Farm Hill Road, on the left from the village at the Hazard Road west intersection. The property had previously been owned by James Hazard, a Revolutionary War Veteran and wife, Betsy in 1787. Betsy had started the orchard that was there for many years. The property was later owned by Sergeant Heath and a series of other owners. Today, it is owned by Warren George. [But, where was the first town farm located, or did they not sell the property in 1852, or began another in the same location in 1857?]

In 1860, the overseer of the poor in Springfield was Orra Howard. There were three categories of the poor. Those of the Town Farm, those "paupers" not on the farm, and "county paupers." The yearly business was published in the 1860 Town Report. At the Town Farm, Orra listed all their services and supplies of the year from 35 cents for seed corn from John Nichols, to \$152.48 for services by Tallant Boice and wife. The amount paid out for the Town Farm in 1860, was \$374.99. The second category, paupers not on the farm, were boarded to the lowest bidder. The room and board services for the poor not on the farm was \$464.00. There were charges from 50 cents for getting a coffin for Ebin Loverin, to \$147.56 to the town of Stewartstown for David J.P. Jefferies. (In another report, a person was paid \$1.00 for attending a funeral.) The third category was County Paupers. There were two people whose board, room, and doctors expenses amounted to \$185.31. This was paid by Sullivan County. In this 1860 Town Report, there was also a list of property sold such as potatoes, oats, etc. and also property on hand.

This policy was followed until 1866 when the Sullivan County Home was begun in Unity, NH.

The town farms (poor farms, or pauper farms) had their limitations. Only the poor and least desirable families tended to board the poor. The children of the poor were looked down upon for their misfortunes by the peers in the district where they were bordered. In the 1860s, New Hampshire began the County Home Plan.

In, 1866, Sullivan County purchased 245 acres in Unity, NH. Over the years the county purchased more acres and finally the Mills property that gave the farm the Marshall Pond for a water supply.

In 1883, the county had built a structure consisting of 18 rooms with baths and closets. Board and room was \$1.52 an week.

Springfield town reports were still listing aid rendered to dependant soldier's families, county paupers, and town paupers in 1891.

The New Hampshire excerpt from the US Government Report summarized the various state poor laws in 1904. New Hampshire overseers of the poor must relieve and maintain the poor of such towns, who are settled there and furnish temporary aid to indigent nonresidents. To be considered a resident, one had to be settled in town for seven consecutive years and paid taxes on real and personal property for four years. No town is liable for support of any person unless he has gained settlement during the seven years before application for relief. The parents, grandparents, children, or grandchildren of any poor person, if of sufficient ability are liable for his support. Town paupers requiring complete care, except honorably discharged veterans, who must be supported outside the alms houses, as well as those without town settlement, are cared for on county poor farms controlled by the county commissioners. The overseers had authority to establish town almshouses, to bound out paupers and to apprentice children. Only county alms houses were maintained by the county, Only in rare cases would minors be retained in county alms houses for more than sixty days, unless with the consent of the state board of charities...

The Springfield Report, 1915 showed that the town paid for county pauper care and expenses for medical attention, and undertakers a cost of \$177.25 for the year. They were reimbursed that amount by Sullivan County. There was a town pauper account listing individuals or families. The total for the town was \$205.75 in 1915.

The Town Report for 1918 showed that Springfield had paid town charity to Bethesda Home in Rumney, NH a sum of \$197.00 for a family of three children and two adults. The money came from the Mahala Gray Fund for poor people in town. The Sullivan County Poor expense was \$10.00 for goods for one family.

Continued changes in care of the poor were made from the 1930's to present day, on the federal, state, county and local level. A new alms house was built at the Sullivan County Farm in the 1930s, but the concepts were changing and it became a Nursing Home for the Elderly. The Social Security Program expanded in the 40's and 50's.

The 1960s saw the advent of Medicare and for the poor Medicaid. In the 1960s, the facilities at Sullivan County Home were expanded. In the 1960 Town Report, Springfield actually spent \$253.94 for public welfare and \$1702.01 for old age assistance.

In 1974, Springfield allotted \$1000.00 for the town poor, but spent \$297.42. One thousand dollars was allotted for old age assistance, but the town only spent \$886.26.

On the county level, The Sullivan County Nursing Home opened a 32 bed special care building for Alzheimer's patients in 1997.

The 2001 Springfield Town Report showed the total of \$1,698.06 in payment for welfare. \$300.00 went to the director's salary; \$1098.06 to general assistance; and \$300.00 to Sullivan County Nutrition.

In the beginning of the 21st century, what was once the Sullivan County Farm or alms house, has gradually become the Sullivan County Health Care Center with 156 beds. It is one of the largest nursing facilities in the state continuing its tradition of caring for the county's elderly. There is no perfect solution yet devised to the problem of being poor, but there have been steps made since the early days when the poor in New Hampshire were given room and board in the house of whomever would take the responsibility for the lowest bid.

Patsy Heath Caswell

(References: Charles McDaniel, *History of Springfield, NH.*, laurag@sullivancountynh.gov, www.poorhousesotyr.com/NH *Legal Summary Excerpt Ruling*, and *Assistance*, Mary Lou McGuire, Newport, NH, *Historical Society*).