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The Poor of Essex County Part 1: From Church of England to Overseers

By Suzanne P. Derieux and Wesley E. Pippenger

In England, the care of the poor was under the charge of the Episcopal state church through the parishes. When the Virginia colony began as a speculative venture by the London Company in 1606, the Episcopal church followed the flag. It became a major part of the new colonies' government, and again, the caretaker of the poor. Each parish was run by an elected group called the Vestry, with two members of the group serving as Church Wardens. The vestry was responsible for collecting levies and tithables and maintaining a register of weddings, christenings, and burials to be presented by the parish clerk to the County court.

Both the civil government and the Church government were in charge of public morals. At each monthly civil court the Church wardens of both South Farnham and St. Anne's would present citizens for such offenses as failure to attend their parish church, swearing, drinking, fornication, or begetting bastard children. If a woman was presented for bearing an illegitimate child, she was fined 500 pounds of tobacco, or 50 shillings, or was given 25 lashes on her bare back. Because of the fear that these children would become a charge on the public, the fine was given to the responsible parish. If the father could be identified, he was required to post bond for support of the child. If the parents were incapable of supporting and bringing up the child or children, the Church wardens could have them bound out to service or as apprentices. This could occur when the child was as young as 4, and lasted until they became 18 (females) or 21 (males).

Between 1727 and 1748, more focus was put on the restraint of vagrant and idle people, women having bastard children, and making better provisions for the poor. Because the poor were exempt from paying certain levies, yet supported by the parish coffers, it became more important to keep them confined within the parish boundaries so that accurate accounting could be maintained. Anyone capable of manual labor who abandoned such labor, or abandoned the support of their family, would be declared a vagabond, and if found wandering, begging, or in violation of any law, would be returned to the parish in which they regularly lived. Any poor found outside their parish were to be returned by any justice of the peace, unless they were sick or disabled. Costs of sick care for the poor and returning them were assessed by their home parish. Any housekeeper keeping a poor person outside of their legal parish, and not notifying the proper church warden, could suffer a fine of £5 or 1,000 pounds of tobacco.

The year 1755 proved to be a milestone for the church when a law was enacted empowering the vestries to erect a workhouse, or to rent a tract of land where they could build houses for the lodging, maintenance, and employment of all poor people of the parish. The rented tract of land was not to exceed 100 acres. A reasonable allowance was made in parish levies for the education of any poor children placed in the house or houses until they were bound out according to law.¹ Church wardens were empowered to order constables to convey all persons found begging in their parish to the poor houses, who were then employed for 20 days or less in labor, which labor was applied toward his or her maintenance. The church wardens were to provide cotton, hemp, flax, or any other necessary

¹ William Waller Hening, *Hening's Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the first Session of the Legislature in 1619* (Richmond, Philadelphia and New York: 1819-1823), 12 volumes. Volume 6, pp. 475-478, May 1755, *An Act for employing and better maintaining the Poor*.

materials, implements, or tools to these working poor. Rules were to be established for the operation of the poor house, and the work, employment, and reform of the poor placed or sent there.

The 1755 act also required church wardens in every parish to keep a book in which was to be recorded the names of all persons who received relief from the parish, with the time they were admitted to the parish, the occasion of such admittance, and other details, so that the poor of every parish were properly identified and accounted for.² Every person receiving relief from the parish and sent to the poor house was to wear a badge of the parish, cut either in blue, red, or green cloth, in an open and visible manner upon the shoulder of the right sleeve of their garment, otherwise the offender could be whipped (not to exceed five lashes) for the offense.³

Overseers of the Poor

The Church of England's reign as the State church ended with the Revolutionary War, and maintenance of the poor changed from a church function to a county function with the creation of the Overseers of the Poor in 1785. An act of Assembly passed that year provided that every county in the state would be 'laid off' in convenient districts. An election would be held in each district to choose "three discreet, fit, and proper persons who were freeholders and residents of the districts", to be an overseer and serve for a term of 3 years.⁴ The overseers from each district were all to meet between April and August each year and levy appropriate sums of either money or tobacco for the necessary relief and support of all poor, lame, blind, or any inhabitants of the county who were not able to maintain themselves. Each district was to return a monthly report of poor orphans to the civil court, and by the 10th of each August, was to submit an account book showing all monies paid out, to whom, and for what reasons.⁵ The overseers of the poor were also charged with putting vagrants to work as long as they resided in the county to make them less of a burden on the public charge.

In January 1799, all the laws relating to the Protestant Episcopal Church in Virginia were repealed. By act of 12 January 1802, the property formerly belonging to the PE church became the people's in the same degree from which the right and interest of the church was derived from them. It was declared that the overseers of the poor could enter upon a tract of land owned by the church (glebe land), if vacant, and use it for a place of general reception of the poor, but the overseers had no power over the church building or the churchyard. Any vacant glebe lands and church property remained entrusted to the overseers and appropriated by them for the benefit of the poor in their county.⁶

In November 1802, the 239-acre glebe tract of St. Anne's Parish was sold to Edward Rouzee for \$1,100 current money of Virginia, and the glebe tract of South Farnham Parish was sold on September 14, 1803 to William Purkins, for \$616.10 shillings current money.⁷ The plate (silver service) belonging to both parishes was sold as well, and the proceeds arising from these sales were invested in Bank of Virginia stock for the support of the poor.

In 1843, two members from each parish were appointed to select a suitable farm for a poor house, while other members were designated to draw up rules for the management of the farm, discipline of the poor and rules for the superintendent of the farm. After consideration of the individual farms of Messrs. Croxton, Durham and Upshaw, the Trustees of the Poor bought a 471-acre tract known as Howard Grove from Muscoe Garnett for \$3,061.50. This farm, located on the Kino road, would house the paupers of the county until the demise of the system in 1938. Dr. Austin Brockenbrough was authorized to sell some of the bank stock for the payment of the farm and other expenses.

In September and October 1844, the Board of Trustees of the Poor for the two parishes in Essex County included William Blackburn, James Burke, Linius Clairbourne Gatewood and Daniel Rennolds from St. Anne's, and Dr. Austin Brockenbrough, Charles Bray, Dr. Adolphus Gustavus Dunbar Roy, and James Semple from South Farnham. Other early trustees were Richard Baylor, Warner Lewis, James M. Matthews and Robert G. Haile. Members were fined \$5 for not appearing at meetings called by the president.

A Superintendent was hired to oversee the poor house, with duties as follows:

² No such record has been found for either parish in Essex.

³ Hening, Vol. 6, pp. 477-478.

⁴ If they refused to serve, without reasonable excuse, a designated overseer of the poor would forfeit and pay ten pounds to be used by the poor, together with court costs. (See Hening, Vol. 12, p. 712, October 1788, *An act for amending the acts concerning the poor*, passed December 25, 1788.)

⁵ Again, no such book has been found for either parish in Essex.

⁶ *Code of Virginia*, 1849, Chapter LXVII, "Of Church property and benevolent associations."

⁷ Essex County Deed Book 36: 298 & same DB 36: 306.

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1. He shall have the direction of the farm as to the cultivation of such products as the Trustees may authorize, attending also to the preservation of the houses, stock, enclosures, and such buildings as may be erected hereafter.
 2. He shall receive all paupers sent to this asylum by the Trustees.
 3. He shall employ all paupers able to work and make them work exercising proper humanity.
 4. He shall make a monthly report to the Board of Trustees showing the work done according to the annexed table, describing age, condition, employment, and capability and aggregate number expenses of each &c.
 5. He shall keep and render an account of all monies and property received and disbursed how many children old enough for schooling and how many it would be proper to bind out to trades.
 6. He shall weekly furnish wood and distribute rations of meat, meal, salt, vinegar, pepper and to the sick groceries, also attend to their cleanliness both in their persons and houses, their morality, and their health, their bed and bedding likewise.
 7. He shall besides the advantages of the farm such as a house, garden, the raising of fowls for the family and cotton and potato patch receive for the above services \$250 for the ensuing years.⁸

On January 28, 1844, the trustees met at Howard Grove farm and made an agreement that the parishes of St. Anne's and South Farnham would bear the expense for the purchase of the farm, and all necessary expenses or charges for the support of the poor equally.⁹ At a meeting of the Overseers of the Poor held at the Essex County Courthouse in Tappahannock, on Monday, June 3, 1844, the following members of the board were appointed: Larkin Hundley (President), Daniel Rennolds, James Croxton, Charles Bray, Benjamin R. Baird, Mourning Johnston, Otway Rennolds, Alexander T. Baylor, James Clarke, Robert Munday, Heritage H. Cauthorn, John W. Fisher (Clerk).¹⁰ Board members represented the 12 districts within the county (six in each parish) and were levied money to use as payouts to the poor in their districts.

A Minute Book was established for the business of the new poor farm, and one of the duties of the Superintendent was to periodically list the names of those residing there. The first to arrive on 1 June 1845 were Kitty Clark, age 35, a nurse, Patsy Clarke, age 40, John Clarke, age 9, and William Clarke, age 5. Soon afterwards Dr. William J. Clarkson was chosen Superintendent, and Dr. John Lewis was appointed the physician of the institution.

The last list in the Minute Book, recorded 1 April 1850, lists 53 paupers residing at the poor farm, of whom 51 were white, two were free blacks, 34 were female, and 19 were male.

When the *Howard Grove* property was bought it contained a dwelling house, stables, and barn. In October 1844, ten log cabins measuring 14 by 16 feet, with 7½ foot high walls and mud chimneys were ordered built to house families. Five were complete by January 1845, and five more were soon ordered. An 1849 plat of the property shows the main house, two groups of five cabins, and a stage of some type, possibly for church services.¹¹

The daily life on the farm included providing food and lodging. It was ordered that the superintendent furnish to each adult resident one peck of sifted cornmeal and two pounds of bacon weekly, while giving half that quantity to children. The surviving paper trail shows many transactions between representatives of the poor house with local merchants for apple brandy, bacon, blankets, wool, coal, corn, meat, salt fish, molasses, rice, salt, salted pork, soap, tallow, tea, and coffee. Itemized invoices can be found for the upkeep and maintenance of individuals, including clothing, shoes, medical supplies and services, and schooling. The Board of Supervisors also approved expenses for transferring persons to and from the poor farm, as well as costs for making coffins, digging graves, and burials.

The Board of Trustees unanimously resolved that no allowances or provisions would be made for any pauper who did not reside upon the premises of the poor house tract. No person would be received at the institution without written order of two or more trustees of the board. Once a resident, paupers were not to be absent from the poor house for more than 24 hours at any time without leave of the superintendent, otherwise rations were reduced. No one could be allowed to visit for longer than 24 hours without permission of the superintendent. Anyone found guilty of any criminal dealings was to be expelled.

⁸ Overseers of the Poor Minute Book, pp. 2-3.

⁹ Essex County Deed Book 48: 365, recorded 17 March 1845.

¹⁰ Overseers of the Poor Minute Book, c.1843-1851, pagination incomplete; on microfilm at the Library of Virginia.

¹¹ Essex County Deed Book.

All persons lodging on the poor house tract were to be employed in some way. The superintendent was authorized to purchase and furnish all implements of work required, whether farm tools, spinning wheels, looms, etc. to keep the residents working. Two acres were laid off to be cultivated, half in cotton and half in vegetables for the use by the poor. They could also grow tobacco for personal use, or to sell for a luxury like fine sugar. The farm grew its own corn and wheat, both for use by the poor, and to sell. The poor house tract, heavily timbered, yielded lumber both for the residents, and for profit. Invoices document the cutting of various quantities of cord wood, and the hauling of logs to a saw mill. Upkeep of the buildings at Howard Grove was done in house as much as possible.

Children over 8 years of age were sent to the school kept by Richard Tunstall Banks. The Board of Trustees recommended paupers to the Essex County Court to be bound out as apprentices, just as the Church Wardens had done. Messrs. Brockenbrough, Semple and Bray were appointed a committee to make such recommendations, and ordered that Matilda Haile, Betsey Rogers, William Griggs, John Clarke, Nancy Cox, Martha Shackelford, Susan Shackelford, Eliza Davis, and Marcus Hammons be recommended as apprentices.

The physician in charge was called in times of illness or injury. In any situation where a group of people were housed together, there were a number of localized epidemics: influenza, dysentery, typhoid. In addition to Dr. Clarkson, Doctors Thomas Gordon, Lawrence Roane, A.G.D. Roy, Austin Brockenbrough, Jones Clopton and William L. Waring all gave service at various times. The medical care was good (for the era) given the number of invoices for Doctor's visits and medicines. Other invoices give odd bits of information, such as the reimbursement of 75¢ to both Mourning Johnston and Pleasant T. Southall in 1846 for making, and putting straps and padding on a wooden leg for a pauper named Jack Guess.¹²

The first recorded deaths at the poor house were Rosa Taylor in June 1845 and Julia Griggs in July 1845. In late 1845, George Durham was paid \$7.00 for making a coffin for Arthur Griggs and one for William Broaddus.¹³ In September 1846, the Board decided that "for any poor person not owning sufficient property to pay for a funeral, any Board member could direct that the person be buried in the way that paupers are usually buried, at the Board's expense".¹⁴ In August 1847, Walter G. Covington was compensated for making two coffins and Mace Clements for making one. While there is no mention in the surviving minutes of a cemetery on the poor house tract, there are numerous other records that record burials there.

Minor revisions to the poor laws, designed to keep slaves and illegitimate children from becoming chargeable, are found in the 1860 edition of the Code of Virginia.

Chapter CIII; 12:

Any person who shall permit an insane, aged or infirm slave owned by him or under his control, to go at large w/o adequate provision for his support, shall be punished by a fine not exceeding \$50.00, and the overseers of the poor...shall provide [f]or his maintenance, and may charge such person quarterly or annually with a sufficient sum...and recover it in the court...If any person shall by sale, gift or otherwise, dispose of any insane, aged or infirm slave, which is...likely to become chargeable, may be proceeded against under this section.

Chap CXXXV; 1, 3, 5 cover the maintenance of illegitimate children.

1) Any unmarried white woman may go before a justice of the county in which she has resided for the previous year, and accuse any free person of being the father of a bastard child of which she is/has been delivered.... A person so accused may be apprehended, and brought before a justice, who shall require him to enter into a recognizance bond...with sureties, in not less than \$50.00, nor more than \$200.00...to appear...and to abide by the order of the court.

3) After such accusation shall have been made, proceedings thereupon may be had at the instance of the woman, or of an overseer of the poor.

5) If the court shall adjudge the accused to be the father of such bastard child, it shall order him to pay to the overseers of the poor of the county...for the maintenance of the said child, such sum as it may deem proper, for each year, until such time as the court may appoint, unless it sooner die.

The following entries were found either in the minutes of the Overseers of the Poor, or in the Essex County Death Register.

¹² Overseers of the Poor Minutes, c.1843-1851, p. 24.

¹³ Overseers of the Poor Minutes, c.1843-1851, pp. 4, 5, 18.

¹⁴ Overseers of the Poor Minutes, c.1843-1851, p. 35.

Abbreviations Used

—	No data available	d.	Died	PH	Poor House (<i>Howard Grove</i>)
c.	approximately	d/o	daughter of	s/o	son of
(C)	Colored	FB	Free Black	wid/o	widow of
c/o	child of	m.	Married		

Date Deceased Name; Description

1845

Jun. 13 Taylor, Rosa; death; age 26
Jul. 13 Griggs, Julia; death; age 18
Nov. 26 Griggs, Arthur; death; age 7
Griggs, Arthur; death; age 7
Dec. 8 Broaddus, William; death; age 4

1846

Jun. 20 Carneal, Patsy; death; age 77
Oct. 6 Dunn, Polly; death; age 65
Oct. 12 Hodgers, Molly; death; age 85
Oct. 16 Shackelford, Harriet; death; age 10
Oct. 21 Hill, Ransdale; death; age 55

1847

Feb. 14 Barrick, Lucy; death; age 60
Jul. 23 Cauthorn, John T.; death; age 16

1848

Jul. — Wright, c/o Nancy; making coffin
Nov. 28 Clarke, John; death; age 30
Nov. 29 Griggs, Medley; death; age 49

1849

Jun. 11 Greenwood, James; making coffin
Jun. 11 Greenwood, —, d/o James; making coffin
Jun. 11 Greenwood, Mrs. —; making coffin

1850

Dec. 4 Williams, Lucy; death; age 36

1856

Jan. 27 Tucker, Maria (C), d/o Susan Tucker; death; age 12, of idiotic fits,¹⁵ at PH
Jun. — —, George (slave) of Elzer Fogg; death; age c.100, cause old age, at PH
Nov. 20 Schools, Sarah, d/o Dawson Schools & Lucy Cross; death; age 10, of fits, at PH

Date Deceased Name; Description

1857

Jun. 21 Broaddus, Elizabeth, d/o William & Rachel Elliott, wid/o Franklin Broaddus, m. 1835; death; age 55, of dropsy, at PH
Dec. 30 Tune, William, s/o John & Catherine Tune; death; age 30, of consumption, at PH

1858

Jun. 15 Coleman, —, d/o Patty Coleman; death; stillborn, d. at PH
Jul. 16 Cooper, Fanny, d/o Betty Cooper; death; age 3, of dysentery, at PH
Nov. 21 Davis, Mary, d/o Anthony & Louisa Tune; death; age c.5, of intermittent fever, at PH

1859

Jul. 10 Williamson, Thomas, s/o John Williamson, Jr. & Lucy Clarke; death; age 8 days, of unknown cause, at PH
Nov. 22 Green, Maria [FB]; parents unknown; death; age 30, of fits, at PH

1860

Jun. 27 Langham, Robert; parents unknown; death; age 40, of consumption, at PH
Jul. 16 Johnston, c/o Betty; burial
Aug. — Jefferies, Martha; parents unknown; death; age 20, of dropsy, at PH
Aug. 10 Jeffries, Martha; burial
Aug. 23 Tucker, c/o Biven; burial
Dec. — Brizendine, Thomas, s/o Thomas & Mary Brizendine; death; age 45, of intemperance, at PH

Under British rule the State Church had charge of the poor in the Virginia colony until the Revolution. The Overseers of the Poor, a group created by the state government to maintain the care of the sick, the blind and the impoverished would, in turn, be destroyed by the War between the States. The changes in the state government and what that meant to the care of the poor will be continued in the next Bulletin, Part 2: The Poor of Essex County.

¹⁵ Fits, or idiotic fits, was a catchall cause of death at the Poor House.

About the Authors

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Do you have upcoming events to add here?

Any other information?

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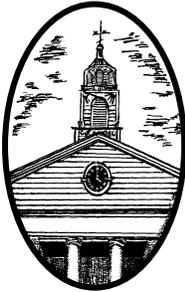
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