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“Remember the Poor” (*Galatians* 2:10): Poor Farms in Vermont

“I’ll starve or freeze to death there [in the woods] before I will go to that accursed poorhouse.” Seth Chase, Stowe, Vermont.¹

By STEVEN R. HOFFBECK

The fear of going to the poorhouse was shared by many Vermonters in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When the mailbox filled with bills, some people grimly joked that their next stop was the poor farm. A town poorhouse or agricultural poor farm was established by many towns in Vermont during the early years of the nineteenth century as an alternative to the traditional practice of “selling” the poor as servants to the highest bidder. It served also as a storehouse for the mentally and physically handicapped before the advent of state-supported agencies for their care. The institution of the poor farm, which did not end in Vermont until 1968, was never intended to be a perfect system of poor-relief; rather, it was a groping attempt to deal with community failure to care for a growing underclass. The Vermont poor farm was one attempt to address the needs of those living on the margins of a prosperous society.²

Vermont’s system of helping the poor, like that of New England generally, was influenced by the early seventeenth century English Poor Law, which placed responsibility for poor relief at the community level. Initially the English church parish, and later the community itself, was charged with administering the law’s statutes. The system called for elected local overseers of the poor whose responsibilities would include supplying work for healthy individuals and aid to people unable to work. For

persons so destitute as not to have a home, almshouses would provide shelter. In these almshouses or poorhouses, inmates were expected to help with their support by accepting work. A poor tax raised money to support the overseer's activities.³

This principle of local public responsibility suited the conditions of colonial New England. Legislation in the colonies did not require an almshouse system, however; and poor people generally looked to relatives and neighbors for aid. Nevertheless, local public authorities accepted responsibility for providing assistance to the poor and destitute.⁴ In the Plymouth Colony, for example, most towns had a common stock of cattle that were farmed out to needy families. They were allowed to get milk from the cows and keep calves born while the cattle were in their custody.⁵

As the population in New England increased in the eighteenth century, so did the number of impoverished inhabitants. In the years after the Revolution, the new states responded to the growing problem by creating legislation to address conspicuous cases of need. In 1797, the Vermont legislature enacted a law that stipulated:

That every town and place in this state, shall relieve, support and maintain their own poor. And the overseers . . . shall relieve, support and maintain all the poor, lame, blind, sick and other inhabitants within such town or place, who are not able to maintain themselves . . . provide for them houses, nurses, physicians, and surgeons.

The legislation also required each community to "prevent the poor, resident within their respective towns or places, from strolling into any other town or place."⁶

This 1797 law provided only a broad outline for the care of the poor. From town to town the approaches differed, but assistance generally consisted of "hiring out," providing food and other necessities in a needy person's home, or, eventually, requiring that the poor live at the town poor farm.

The general policy of many towns, however, was "hiring out," which often amounted to little more than having the overseers of the poor present the local paupers at auction and send them to the lowest bidder. Such procedures allowed for cases similar to one in Panton, Vermont, in which thirteen-year-old Aaron Bristol was indentured to a local farmer until he reached the age of twenty-one.⁷ Occasionally the care provided to the auctioned pauper was adequate, but "more often the one to whom the person was struck off was looking for a bargain, was not overscrupulous as to the clothes and food furnished or the amount of service demanded."⁸ The lowest bidder quite often could be "some sordid soul, who pinched and starved the unfortunate beings, who were thus at his mercy."⁹ This method, however, "at once relieved their [the public's] consciences and saved their pocketbooks."¹⁰

Abuse of the poor did not go unnoticed, and some towns, such as Hartford in 1813, placed “the town’s poor under the special care of the overseers; i.e., not to sell them.” In Hartford’s plan, food, heating fuel, or lodging could be provided through the overseer’s auspices.¹¹ In such instances, the policy’s success depended upon the character and compassion of the overseer rather than that of the lowest bidder. Yet a prime requirement for becoming an overseer of the poor, according to Andrew Nuquist, a student of Vermont town government, was the “ability to be ‘hard-boiled’ with those who needed help.”¹²

Vermont’s towns had no legal responsibility to provide poor-relief for individuals who were not town residents. Thus, another key method used by communities to keep costs low was to “warn out” poor people or persons who appeared likely to become poor. The “warning out” policy gave local officials a wide latitude in determining the extent of poor-relief needed in their town. In Hartford, “hundreds of families were legally warned and driven out of town.” If a person had been officially “warned out,” the townspeople were not responsible for the care of that individual or his or her family, should any family members become destitute. Individuals singled out in this way were typically sent back to their previous town of residence. Local officials served warning diligently, both to save the town’s money and to provide funds for themselves. It was a potentially profitable process for town officials: a fee could be collected for “selectmen who prepared the warrant, another for the constable [who delivered the warrant], and another for the clerk” who saw to it that the constable delivered the warrant.¹³

The Vermont legislature passed a law in 1817 attempting to put an end to warnings out of town, but the legislation did not resolve the sticky question of what constituted town residency.¹⁴ Communities continued to dispute the origins and residency of drifting poor people, and the conflicts caused “more lawsuits between towns than almost anything else” during the course of the nineteenth century.¹⁵

Despite the practice of “hiring out” and the efforts of relatives and friends to provide care for indigent community members,¹⁶ the problem of poverty in nineteenth-century Vermont proved larger than these essentially private endeavors could resolve. It was this increasingly unmet town obligation to care for its needy that led to the establishment of poor farms in Vermont. During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, several towns “decided to buy a farm, hire a farmer and his wife and bring all the poor of the town together.”¹⁷ The first poorhouse in Burlington was established in 1816. Middlebury rented its first poorhouse in 1822, and by 1825 purchased a poor farm. Newbury started a poor farm in 1837.¹⁸ In 1834 the towns of Fairfield, Sheldon, St. Albans, and

Swanton jointly agreed to purchase a 150-acre property in the town of Sheldon as a poor farm.¹⁹ The associated poor farm at Sheldon made it possible for these small towns to pool their poor and reduce expenses. Other towns saved on costs by buying inexpensive farmhouses and accompanying land, but then were sometimes forced to abandon them when the buildings became too dilapidated for further use.

Town officials considered the poor farm a cost-effective means of handling the increased number of poor people created, at least in part, by the periodic downturns in the national economy. The Panic of 1817 apparently touched off the first wave of poor farms. The Irish migration of the 1840s and 1850s, coinciding with the potato famine in Ireland, put additional burdens on the relief systems as many Irish filtered through Canada to Burlington and other Vermont towns.²⁰

Generally communities chose to locate their poor farms on back roads out of the sight of most town residents. Some were selected in isolated spots because land could be bought at a lower price. For example, the Sheldon poor farm in 1881-82 was "stony and on a very poor road."²¹ Travel to and from such locations was sometimes almost impossible during the mud of spring and the snow of winter. Burlington located its poorhouse in 1824 close to the town's center;²² its two later poor farm locations were two or three miles out of town. This distance from community life was, for some impoverished citizens, an additional deterrent to accepting the relief available through the poor farm. In 1879, Burlington's overseer of the poor reported that he was able to discourage some poor people from seeking assistance by refusing them any aid unless they moved to the poor farm three miles from town. Often, to his "great surprise . . . he found applicants' . . . spirits and abilities revive so that they no longer needed aid, and some at once left the city."²³

Those who accepted poor farm assistance fell into two general groups, transient residents and permanent residents. The transients usually were physically able persons who had fallen upon hard economic times and were expected to find jobs and leave the poorhouse as soon as possible.²⁴ Tramps and vagrants constituted a part of the transient population who often found places in the poorhouses, although some towns refused to help such persons at all. Other Vermont communities specifically designated an individual who was paid to give aid to tramps. Still other towns installed vagrants in the city jail or gave them one night's lodging at the poor farm. The tiny town of Orwell placed tramps in a steel cage in their old jailhouse for an overnight stay.²⁵

The poorhouse, however, served primarily as a permanent residence — or dumping ground — for those mentally and physically ill persons whose relatives could not handle their care at home. In an era before nursing



This two-page spread shows the Sheldon Poor House Association buildings, jointly managed by Fairfield, Sheldon, St. Albans, and Swanton as a way to reduce costs for poor relief.

homes or mental hospitals, the poor farm came to be the permanent home of many of the community's old, sick, deaf, insane, and crippled. The case of Putnam Proctor Wilson of Hartford is an example of how mentally unstable persons were treated in the poor farm system. In 1832, the town of Hartford built a new house at its poor farm with an "apartment especially for Put. Wilson, containing a cage." Hartford had two other insane inmates at the same time that Wilson was caged there. William Howard Tucker described the three:

These men were raving crazy most of the time, and there, caged up like wild beasts in narrow filthy cells, the writer often saw them, and viewing their scanty, ragged attire, their pallets of straw, and their pitiable condition, was impressed that the inhuman treatment to which they were subjected, was sufficient of itself to make lunatics of all men. Poor old Put. had some rational moments, was always pleased to see children, to whom he would sing the old song, "Friendship to every willing mind," &c., as often as requested.²⁶

The number of people categorized as "insane" residing in Vermont poorhouses began to decline after 1880,²⁷ primarily because of the opening of the Vermont State Asylum for the Insane at Waterbury in 1890 and the expansion of the Vermont Asylum for the Insane at Brattleboro.²⁸ By 1903 the number of the mentally ill in poorhouses had dropped to thirty-four from a high of 1,015 in 1880.²⁹



Photograph from the 1937 publication, More Than One Hundred Years in the Sheldon Poor House History, 1833-1937, compiled by Edward P. Kearney.

In 1903 most people living at poor farms were older than sixty-five years of age.³⁰ When George Vietheer completed his study of Vermont poorhouses in 1937, ninety percent of the inmates were over age forty-five. For residents above that age, the tendency was not to leave the institution.³¹ Florence Nolan, the manager of the Sheldon Poor Farm from 1947 until it closed in 1968, reported that “Generally, when they would bring someone there, the family would just go and forget.” She recalled “one old guy there” who “was up in his nineties and he was the father of 16 girls. . . . They all lived around Sheldon but only one ever came to see him. . . . He died there.”³²

Health conditions for poor farm inhabitants generally were inferior. In a 1916 study K. R. B. Flint reported that cases of tuberculosis had been found in poorhouses at Bennington, Colchester, Barre Town, and Hartland; syphilis at Rutland, Woodbury, and Pomfret; and venereal disease at Plainfield.³³ In Vietheer’s 1937 study, nine poorhouses had poor bedding and furniture, and seven had inadequate toilets and baths.³⁴ At the Burlington poor farm, most people slept on straw mattresses.

Work requirements at the poor farms varied according to the capabilities of the inmates. In 1933, eleven of the nineteen almshouses studied by Vietheer were involved in commercial farming. The crops were used as

food in the poorhouses, with any excess given to the town needy or sold. Able-bodied residents were assigned jobs by the farm manager. Many were too old or infirm to work, however, and passed their time in idleness. Often the only recreation was reading old newspapers and magazines or, in later years, listening to a radio, if available.³⁵

Discipline was enforced among poor farm residents in a variety of ways. The 1797 poor-relief legislation allowed whipping as a punishment in workhouses. As time passed whipping was replaced by other punishments. One form was solitary confinement in a pesthouse, a shed primarily used to quarantine smallpox patients on the farm. At the Sheldon poorhouse, regulations in 1867 provided that refusal to work by able-bodied inmates “may be punished by withholding food. Not to exceed two meals at any one time.”³⁶ A doctor employed at Sheldon reported that “inmates who made trouble or who couldn’t be tolerated were packed off to Waterbury [State Asylum] or Brandon [Training School].”³⁷

The history of the Burlington poor farm was comparable to that of the poor-relief system in other larger towns such as Montpelier and Rutland. The number of Burlington’s poor was influenced by several factors. As with many other growing communities, Burlington experienced the ups and downs of the national economy in the nineteenth century, including the panics of 1817, 1857, 1873, and the 1890s. T. D. S. Bassett points out that the city was a natural reservoir for the flow of transients from Canada in the depression years following the Panic of 1873. The poor from Canada were a constant factor in Burlington, and the numbers of Irish surged again in the 1860s and 1870s, after the large influx in the potato famine years of the 1840s.³⁸ During the Civil War Burlington was called upon to “assist the families of deceased soldiers” and to provide assistance to the families of men who had been drafted but whose pay had not yet reached the families at home.³⁹

Burlington’s overseer of the poor had to make difficult decisions concerning which individuals would be granted aid by the city and which would be left to fend for themselves. The overseer granted wood for heating; distributed boots, shoes, and other articles of clothing; and provided food for families he deemed to be in need. He was also charged with the task of paying burial expenses for indigents. The biggest task for the overseer, however, was to manage the poor farm or poorhouse. The overseer, along with the poor farm supervisor, also had the responsibility of determining the point at which an inmate suffering from mental illness became unmanageable. If judged to be too mentally unsound to live at the farm, the inmate would be assigned to the Vermont insane asylum at Brattleboro and support would be paid by the town.⁴⁰

As with other poor farms, inmates of the Burlington facility were either

long-term or short-term residents. Long-term residents generally were elderly or physically handicapped. In 1871, for example, extended resident Jerusha Waters, age sixty-two, was a "cripple." Mary Marks, age seventy-three, was blind and had lived at the farm for nineteen years; and John Trudo, eighty-six years old, had been there for eleven years because of a handicap described simply as "old age."⁴¹ The population of the long-term residents ranged from a high of thirty-seven in 1872 to a low of eleven in 1899 and 1901.⁴²

The majority of Burlington's poor farm inmates were short-term residents, living there only a few months at a time until their economic situation improved. Often individuals arrived in the last months of winter after their heating fuel was gone; with warmer weather in April or May they would leave. Tramps and vagabonds were actively discouraged. In the economically troubled 1870s, tramps who arrived in Burlington were diverted from the poor farm and instead given the inhospitable shelter of the local jail.⁴³

The Burlington poor farm was moved several times after its inception in 1816.⁴⁴ The initial structure, known as a "work house," consisted of four rented rooms in a "high barracks," with few amenities (a work house committee observed that "no water can be procured for the use of the rooms short of the lake").⁴⁵ By 1817 the rental rooms were abandoned because they were deemed too expensive. In 1821 the community procured the use of another house, which was maintained for two years and then it, too, was abandoned. Finally, in 1824 the overseer of the poor called for the establishment of a permanent poorhouse. In that year, a structure was purchased for eight hundred dollars at the southwest corner of Union and College streets, at the site of the present-day College Street Congregational Church.⁴⁶ The poorhouse continued there until 1836 when the city bought the farm of Frederick Purdy, "lying 2½ miles south of the village, on the Shelburne Road, for the sum of \$2,000."⁴⁷

The Shelburne Road poor farm was located on a seventy-acre plot of land across the railroad tracks from Shelburne Bay. The farmhouse was described in the late 1850s as an "old, dilapidated, and comfortless shell."⁴⁸ In 1859 the town constructed a brick building near the old house. The new structure measured 48' x 48', was two stories high, and could accommodate seventy-five people. Its basement contained a kitchen, dining room and one bedroom; the ground floor had two sleeping rooms, four bedrooms, and the keeper's room; and the second floor four large bedrooms. Water closets were located on the first and second floors for the convenience of elderly and disabled persons.⁴⁹ Two coal-burning stoves heated the building, the upstairs supplied with "dumb stoves" warmed by the stoves below. Two new cisterns and a well were in-

stalled.⁵⁰ In 1861, the overseer of the poor admitted that the new house would “not always appear as cleanly as a well regulated private dwelling” because the institution had to care for “the lowest and vilest of characters,” but he declared that “our Poor House will compare favorably with like institutions in the State.”⁵¹

The 1859 structure continued in use for forty-four years. By 1896, the inadequacies of the aging building could not be ignored. In that year’s annual report, the overseer complained of the need for more rooms, a better water supply, a separation of the feeble-minded from those of sound mind, and in general, “the great necessity of better accommodation for the inmates of the poor farm.”⁵² The city finally sold the Shelburne Road poor farm in 1903, and a new location was found in the far north part



Burlington’s last poor farm, located on Goodrich Road, was discontinued in 1958. This photograph of the facility’s brick farmhouse is from the Burlington Annual Report, 1957.

of town, on Goodrich Road, at a cost of \$1,493.80. The building at the Goodrich Road location previously had been used as an isolation hospital for smallpox patients.⁵³ K. R. B. Flint described the property in 1916 as fifty-four acres of land and a brick house 24’ x 64’. The house was “supplied with toilet and bathing facilities” and was appraised at fifteen hundred dollars. Flint reported that as of October 1, 1916, it was accommodating twenty-nine of the city’s poor residents, only one of whom was under the age of sixteen.⁵⁴

This facility, the city’s last poor farm, was finally closed in 1958. In

the annual city report of 1957, a photograph of the big brick farmhouse was contrasted with plans for the city's new Ethel P. Mildram Nursing Home. In the hopeful spirit of the 1950s, the city proclaimed that "the old concept of farming out our less fortunate will be discontinued" and a "new concept of public responsibility will be instituted in our new Nursing Home."⁵⁵ Subsequently, a new elementary school was built on the old poor farm property.

Several factors influenced the decline in the population and number of Vermont's poor farms during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The turn of the century brought a growth in the number of local affiliates of national helping agencies and other charity organizations such as the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army. Local initiatives resulted in the founding of such agencies as the Mary Fletcher Hospital (1876) and the Elizabeth Lund Home for unmarried mothers (1890) in Burlington, and voluntary relief and social assistance efforts spread throughout the state. Homes for elderly women became more numerous and the institutionalization of the insane in asylums gained increasing acceptance.⁵⁶

Also, in the early years of the twentieth century, Vermont legislators provided for expansion in public welfare responsibilities of state agencies that helped reduce pressure for the services of local poor farms. The Vermont Board of Charities and Probation, which had been established in 1917, was replaced in 1923 by the State Department of Public Welfare.⁵⁷ This new agency was responsible for establishing the state's Mother's Aid program in the 1920s. It provided basic food and shelter for needy widows and their children. By the 1920s, the state of Vermont had also expanded its role in caring for the mentally and physically ill so that poor farms increasingly were becoming care providers for those people who were not eligible for placement in a state institution. Partly because of these reforms, the total number of poor farms in Vermont dropped from sixty-two in 1916 to thirty-seven by 1928.⁵⁸

In the 1930s, local administrators of poor-relief services continued to yield control to more distant government levels. Contributing to this shift were the New Deal initiatives of Franklin D. Roosevelt in response to the Great Depression. The depression of the 1930s had put intense demands on towns to care for the drastically increased numbers of poor and unemployed persons. In 1930 a total of 183 families in Burlington were on some form of relief; by 1932, that number had increased to 699 families. Beginning in 1933, New Deal legislation sought to shift the cost of the local relief burden, emphasizing home relief and work relief through federally financed programs administered in Vermont by local and state officials. Home relief supplied the needy with food, clothing, heating fuel

or rental aid, a twenty-five percent discount on doctor bills, and free burial. Work relief provided employment for the destitute unemployed in projects on town roads, properties, and reforestation projects. Two of the work relief programs, the Civil Works Administration, 1933-34, and the Works Progress Administration, begun in 1935, were not only federally financed but also federally administered.⁵⁹

The launching of a national social security system through the Social Security Act of 1935 provided one of the biggest changes in administration of welfare services. A long-term effect of this legislation for old-age assistance was that it opened the way economically for more persons to live on their own.⁶⁰ For the incapacitated elderly, social security funds made accessible improved care in hospitals, private homes, and eventually nursing homes. The Social Security Act also provided survivor's benefits for widows and the fatherless. Existing Vermont legislation had prohibited poor farms from keeping orphans longer than ninety days; the benefits for orphans through the national welfare system enabled some young poor to stay totally out of the poorhouse system.

Federal initiatives involving the distribution of commodities, work relief programs, and agencies such as the Civilian Conservation Corps all helped Vermont towns survive the depression years; these public programs also helped make it possible for towns to begin closing their poor farms. During the late 1930s and 1940s several medium-sized Vermont communities shut their operations. In this, they generally preceded the larger towns.⁶¹ For example, Hartland closed its town farm in 1938, Irasburg's farm was sold in 1944; and the Stowe poor farm was closed in 1948.⁶² Among larger towns, in contrast, Brattleboro's town farm closed in 1951, Bennington's in 1952-1953, Montpelier's in 1956, St. Johnsbury's in 1958, and Middlebury's in 1959. As has been noted, Burlington's poor farm was sold in 1958. Rutland closed its town farm in June 1966.⁶³ One factor influencing the later closings by the larger towns was their relatively greater investment in poor farm facilities. For example, Montpelier and Brattleboro ran dairies as part of their town farms. Milk from these farms was given to poor families or was sold, with the proceeds from the sale used to support the farm. Relatively large investments in the farms, perhaps combined with bureaucratic inertia, led to their continuance in the larger towns into the 1950s.

By the 1960s, the federal commitment to welfare was expanded further through programs providing food stamps, cash grants, rent subsidies, Medicaid, and similar programs, and the few remaining poor farms were legislated out of existence. The last poor farm in Vermont was the Sheldon poor farm, which closed in 1968. The end arrived for Vermont's poor farms when the state's Social Welfare Act of 1967 formally removed from

towns both the right to operate a poor farm and the legal responsibility for the care of the poor. The act also abolished the office of overseer of the poor.⁶⁴ The control of poor-relief finally had come to reside wholly with state and federal welfare administrations.

Andrew E. Nuquist has written of Vermont in the nineteenth century that "the 'poorhouse' was considered the last word in disgrace and for the aged, the poor, the diseased, the insane, and the crippled to be sent there was almost like receiving a death sentence."⁶⁵ It was no less true for the poor's twentieth-century counterparts. Our knowledge of these inmates' feelings about their experience is scarce and inadequate.⁶⁶ Even physical reminders are almost gone from the landscape. Often the only remaining trace of once-busy poor farms is a street sign bearing the name "Poor Farm Road." Nevertheless, it is important to remember and understand not only the experience of Vermont's poor but also their communities' responses to that experience through 150 years of the local poor farm.

NOTES

¹ "Threescore and Ten Club, Biographies of Early Settlers of Stowe, Vermont," unpublished manuscript, Stowe Library, quoted in Lorenzo D'Agostino, *The History of Public Welfare in Vermont* (Winooski Park, Vt.: St. Michael's College Press, 1948), 103. At various times, a "poorhouse" is called an almshouse, a town farm, or a poor farm. In this essay the terms will be used interchangeably.

² An attitude of reluctance in aiding the poor people of Vermont is evident in numerous town histories. An example is *Green Mountain Heritage: The Chronicle of Northfield, Vermont* (Canaan, N.H.: Phoenix Publishers, 1974), 76.

³ George C. Vietheer, *Relief Administration in the Urban Communities of Vermont* (St. Albans, Vt.: Messenger Press, 1937), 1. In 1562, sturdy beggars were required by Parliament to wear identification badges made of painted cloth or metal. In 1572 a fine of twenty shillings was imposed on those who gave money to beggars. Sailors who had been shipwrecked could beg legally if they procured a signed testimonial from a local justice of the peace. Overseers of the poor were established in most English towns by 1572. For further information on the poor laws see Sir George Nicholls, *A History of the English Poor Law in Connection with the State of the Country and the Condition of the People* (London: P. S. King and Son, 1904), 151-183.

⁴ David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), xiii. The Puritans considered poverty a crime and a disgrace, and this view prevailed in New England. The Quakers, however, felt that "sympathetic help" should be given to the unfortunate and gave such aid as early as 1682 in Philadelphia. An almshouse was opened in that city in 1713. See Frederick B. Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia, 1682-1763* (New York: Norton, 1953), 65, 67.

⁵ John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 80-81.

⁶ William Slade, Jr., ed., *The Laws of Vermont, of a Public and Permanent Nature: Coming Down To, and Including, the Year 1825* (Windsor, Vt.: Published for the State by Simeon Ide, 1825), 370.

⁷ Panton, Vermont, "Overseers of the Poor Account Book, 1838-1861," Special Collections, Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont, Burlington. This bound manuscript contains an 1837 letter of indenture set up by the town's overseer of the poor. It seems likely that the boy's mother was being cared for by the town.

⁸ William Monroe Newton, *History of Barnard, Vermont* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1928) 1:289.

⁹ Frederic P. Wells, *History of Newbury, Vermont* (St. Johnsbury, Vt.: Caledonia Company, 1902), 286.

¹⁰ Jericho Historical Society, *History of Jericho, Vermont* (Burlington: Free Press Printing Company, 1916), 131.

¹¹ William Howard Tucker, *History of Hartford, Vermont, 1761-1889* (Burlington: Free Press Association, 1889), 307.

¹² Andrew E. Nuquist, *Town Government in Vermont: Or, "Making Democracy 'Democ.'"* (Burlington: Government Research Center, University of Vermont, 1964), 95.

¹³ Tucker, *History of Hartford*, 20. Also *Green Mountain Heritage*, 77, and Wells, *History of Newbury*, 286. The fees for delivering the warnings were sixty-seven cents in one case and twenty-five cents in another. Obviously, the more warnings served, the more coins were awarded to the messengers. The greatest depth of discussion on warning out is found in D'Agostino, *History of Public Welfare in Vermont*, 71-73. An early warning out notice, from *Green Mountain Heritage*, 77, read:

State of Vermont Orange County to either Constable of Northfield in the County of Orange greeting You are hereby required to summon Reuben Dike; now residing in Northfield to depart said town-hereof fail not but of this precept and your doings herein due return made according to Law-given under our hand at Northfield this twelfth day of March 1807. Abraham Shipman Joseph Nichols, Charles Jones, Selectmen of Northfield.

The constable's statement that he fulfilled this duty read:

State of Vermont Orange County at Northfield in said county on the seventeenth day of March in the year of our Lord 1807. I served this precept by leaving a true and attested copy of summons with the within named Reuben Dike. Attest Ezekiel Robinson, Constable.

¹⁴ Town of Northfield, *Green Mountain Heritage*, 77. Also, Slade, *The Laws of Vermont*, 381-383, shows how Vermont tried to further define residency, since the town was the legal unit liable for the care of its own poor people.

¹⁵ Wells, *History of Newbury*, 285.

¹⁶ See Gene Sessions, "'Years of Struggle': The Irish in the Village of Northfield, 1845-1900," in *Vermont History* 55 (Spring 1987):77, for an example of how eight children supported their mother who was widowed in 1871 in Northfield. In the 1930s, town overseers had problems deciding which individuals were to work on W.P.A. projects in towns because a person in Vermont was "ineligible for town help or Federal work relief so long as a relative, who is morally or legally responsible, is able to support him." The difficulty in the 1930s was the sheer number of unemployed people who technically were able to work but had no work available. The relatives were supposed to support these unemployed people yet could not because they might also be unemployed. *Annual Report: Windsor, Vermont, 1935*, 60.

¹⁷ Newton, *History of Barnard, Vermont*, 1:289.

¹⁸ Samuel Swift, *History of the Town of Middlebury, in the County of Addison, Vermont* (Middlebury: A. H. Copeland, 1859), 318. Also, Wells, *History of Newbury*, 286. It must be noted that some towns never acquired poor farms because the requests for relief were never large in number. In Athens, for example, no orders for poor relief were issued for the years 1899-1906, 1918, and 1920-1924. As W. W. Bridges, the overseer of the poor for Athens, wrote in 1899: "Through the kindness, and mercy of the overruling power. [sic] All inhabitants of Athens have been blest with an abundance, for their comfort and welfare for the year ending March _____ 1900." Athens, Vermont, "Records of the Overseer of the Poor, March 4, 1892-February 2, 1925," Special Collections, Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont.

¹⁹ Edward P. Kearney, *More Than One Hundred Years in the Sheldon Poor House History, 1833-1937* (St. Albans, Vt.: Messenger Press, 1937), 7.

²⁰ T. D. S. Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont, 1840-1880" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1952), 190.

²¹ Viethcer, *Relief Administration*, 11.

²² W. S. Rann, ed., *History of Chittenden County, Vermont* (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason, 1886), 450, states that the first location of the poorhouse was "on the southwest corner of the present Union and College streets."

²³ *Annual Report: City of Burlington, 1879*, 54.

²⁴ "Life and Death on the Poor Farm," *Vanguard Press*, 22-29 October 1987, 11.

²⁵ Orwell Historical Society, *A History of Orwell, Vermont, Past and Present* (Orwell: Orwell Historical Society, 1988), photo, 56. In Woodstock, tramps would receive a large can of beans, one-half loaf of bread and three bags of tea for a supper and breakfast; then they were sent on their way. *Annual Town Report: Woodstock, Vermont, 1940*, 2A.

²⁶ Tucker, *History of Hartford*, 308.

²⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *Report on Crimes, Pauperism and Benevolence* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), 836. See also D'Agostino's *History of Public Welfare*. His book provides vital sources on the welfare system in Vermont.

²⁸ *Waterbury, Vermont* (Waterbury, Vt.: Waterbury Bicentennial Association, 1963), 8. Esther

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Munroe Swift and Mona Beach, *Brattleboro Retreat, 1834-1984* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Brattleboro Retreat, 1984), 51-57.

²⁹ D'Agostino, *The History of Public Welfare*, 100.

³⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, *Almshouse Population in the U.S.* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), as cited in D'Agostino, *The History of Public Welfare*, 101.

³¹ Vietheer, *Relief Administration*, 78.

³² *Vanguard Press*, 22-29 October 1987, 10.

³³ K. R. B. Flint, *Poor-Relief in Vermont* (Norwich, Vt.: Norwich University, 1916), 24-31.

³⁴ Vietheer, *Relief Administration*, 81.

³⁵ Vietheer, *Relief Administration*, 75. On occasion townspeople in Bakersfield put on dances at the poor farm. Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Rupert Montague, Bakersfield, Vt., March 30, 1989.

³⁶ Kearney, *One Hundred Years*, 46.

³⁷ *Vanguard Press*, 22-29 October 1987, 11.

³⁸ Bassett, *Urban Penetration*, 659-660.

³⁹ *Report: Town of Burlington, 1864*, 4.

⁴⁰ *Report: Town of Burlington, 1863*, 20.

⁴¹ *Report: City of Burlington, 1872*, 104.

⁴² *Report: City of Burlington, 1899*, 171; *1901*, 181; *1872*, 105; *1906*, 94.

⁴³ See Bassett, *Urban Penetration*, 658-660, for details on vagrants.

⁴⁴ It is helpful in looking at Burlington to understand the number of poor farms in Chittenden County. Chittenden County, Vermont, in 1916 had five poor farms: in Burlington, Charlotte, Colchester, Milton, and the Union Poor Farm in Williston. Information about the Union Poor Farm, located across the Winooski River from Essex Junction at the edge of the town of Williston, is in the *Burlington Free Press*, 9 October 1861, 2. The Union Poor Farm consisted of 240 acres of land with a two-story wooden house measuring 33' x 52'. This Union Poor Farm, purchased in Williston in 1859, served to reduce the local poor tax of the associated towns of Shelburne, Williston, and Essex by "about 70%" within two years of its inception. Before this time the poor were boarded out, "generally with the lowest bidder." In 1861 the burden of supporting the poor comprised over half of the entire town taxes. The town of Jericho joined this Union Poor Farm later.

⁴⁵ Abby Maria Hemenway, ed., *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer* (Burlington, Vt.: Miss A. M. Hemenway, 1868) 1:506. The barracks apparently were used during the War of 1812 to house American troops.

⁴⁶ Hemenway, *Gazetteer*, 1:506.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Burlington Free Press*, 10 January 1860, 2.

⁴⁹ With so many infirm people in a poorhouse, an indoor privy of some type was not a luxury, it was a necessity.

⁵⁰ *Burlington Free Press*, 10 January 1860, 2.

⁵¹ *Report: Town of Burlington, 1861*, 9.

⁵² *Report: City of Burlington, 1896*, 193; *1897*, 174; *1899*, 173.

⁵³ *Report: City of Burlington, 1903*, 13, 148.

⁵⁴ Flint, *Poor-Relief*, 25.

⁵⁵ *Burlington, Vermont, 1957, Ninety-Second Annual Report*, (Burlington: Queen City Printers, 1957), 33. This last Burlington Poor Farm was located at the end of the present-day Ethan Allen Parkway. The property is now the site of the Smith Elementary School.

⁵⁶ Vermont, Relief Committee of Seven, *Welfare Agencies In Vermont: A Directory, 1932* (Montpelier: State Department of Education, 1932), 10, 12, 15, 18. See this volume for a list of helping agencies.

⁵⁷ Department of Public Welfare, *A Comprehensive Welfare Program for Vermont, 1946* (Montpelier: Department of Public Welfare, 1946), 6. See also D'Agostino, *The History of Public Welfare*, 271. The names of the welfare agencies changed with the times. The town of Burlington provides a good example of such name changes. At first, the overseer of the poor was simply helped by the town selectmen. In 1872, the overseer was the head of the Pauper Department. This became the Board of Charities in 1907, a name that was not quite as judgmental of the status of the less fortunate. Finally, in 1949, the group was given its modern name, the Department of Public Welfare. *Reports: Burlington, 1872, 1907, 1949*. In 1903, the department was called the "Poor Department."

⁵⁸ *Biennial Report of the Department of Public Welfare, 1928* (Rutland: Tuttle Company, 1928), 147.

⁵⁹ Vietheer, *Relief Administration*, 12-17.

⁶⁰ Vietheer, *Relief Administration*, 90.

⁶¹ Another factor in the decreasing use of poor farms was direct pressure from the state government. The Department of Public Welfare reported in 1930 that "We try to discourage towns operating poor farms to any great extent." In addition, legislation to abolish poor farms was introduced in the legislature in 1918, 1929, 1934, 1938, and 1946. *1930 Report of the Department of Public Welfare*, 173. Margaret

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B. Whittlesey, *Vermont Conference of Social Welfare: The First Fifty Years, 1916-1966, A Brief History* (Burlington: Vermont Conference of Social Welfare, 1966), 13.

⁶² *Report: Hartland, Vermont, 1939*, 13. *Irassburg Town Report, 1944*, 24. *Annual Report: Town of Stowe, Vermont, 1948*, 16. Closings in the 1920s occurred at Waterbury in 1922, Newbury in 1928, and Weathersfield in 1929. See *Town Reports* for the respective towns. Weathersfield's report of the closing is revealed in the 1933 report.

⁶³ *Annual Report, Bennington, Vermont, 1952*, 8. *Annual Report, 1958, St. Johnsbury*, 22. *Ninety-Sixth Annual Auditor's Report, 1951, Brattleboro*, 11. *74th Annual Report, City of Rutland, Vermont 1966*, 63. *Annual Report: Middlebury, Vermont, 1959*, 11-12. *Annual Report: Montpelier, Vermont, 1956*, 41.

⁶⁴ *Laws of Vermont: An Act Relating to Social Welfare, 1967* (Montpelier: State of Vermont, 1967), 248. The overseers were required to turn over all their records to the town clerks in the respective towns. In the town of Bakersfield, Vermont, the title of overseer of the poor was kept until 1982 when the position was called the town service director. This official disbursed funds from the J. K. Maynard Fund, a private endowment for the "worthy poor." The worthy poor were those persons whose homes had been destroyed by fire or who had suffered extensive illness in the family. This information is from an interview by the author with Mr. and Mrs. Rupert Montague in Bakersfield, Vermont, on March 30, 1989; a copy of the transcript of the oral interview is in the Bailey-Howe Library at the University of Vermont. Mr. and Mrs. Montague felt that the small towns in Vermont looked upon the poor as simply "down on their luck."

⁶⁵ Nuquist, *Town Government*, 97.

⁶⁶ A few poor farm residents in Vermont are described in Harry F. Perkins, *A Eugenic Survey of Vermont* (Burlington: University of Vermont, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1931). However, Perkins was predisposed to discover the inferiority of the poor and the need to constrict their reproduction. For a recent analysis of the eugenics survey in Vermont, see Kevin Dann, "The Purification of Vermont," *Vermont Affairs* 4 (Summer / Fall 1987):27-31.