

Carroll Yesteryears
13 December 2020
A 'bright and happy' Almshouse
By Beverly Humbert

It's that time of year again. The Carroll County Farm Museum is open for self-guided outdoor tours and children can visit a socially distanced Santa. Sadly, the Almshouse on the grounds will not be open for our annual, themed Christmas tours. As a house volunteer for eight years, I have missed the fellowship and pleasure of decorating for the holidays and adding to its beauty this season.

Originating in 1853 as the Almshouse for the county's poor and needy, in 1912 it became known as the County Home. During my research of the house I learned that another person also took great pleasure in the holidays and the County Home, Mary Bostwick Shellman. As Westminster's celebrated citizen, she served as Santa Claus for the poor and needy from 1895 until 1918. To see that the County Home residents were not forgotten, each November Miss Shellman made a lengthy, scripture-filled appeal in the *Democratic Advocate* or *The [Carroll County] Times* explaining the need to bring "cheer and brightness" to the residents at Christmas. She asked local citizens, general stores, businesses, and churches to donate money or small trinkets for distribution at the County Home during their holiday festival.

To begin the celebration, traditionally held Christmas Day or New Year's Day, the residents were served a bountiful dinner in the large dining room at the front of the house. It was decorated with hanging greens, red berries, and bells to bring a taste of the season to the room. Later in the day, the Steward of the house and his wife, friends, and town officials enjoyed a meal in the family dining room. Following dinner, all able residents remained in the front room where Miss Shellman handed out gifts found beneath a tall, decorated tree standing in the corner. A newspaper tells us that "following the distribution of gifts of gloves, socks, and tobacco for the men, slippers, white aprons and little things to brighten and make their bedrooms home-like for the women, each person also received a box of chocolate and an orange." Local church pastors took turns each year bringing worship to the house. Community members, church goers, and Western Maryland College students helped carry the Christmas spirit in the services singing carols, performing solos and reading scriptures.

In January, Miss Shellman offered a delightful newspaper account of the day's events at the County Home. She extended thanks for the many contributions from the citizens of Carroll County. "Christmas was made very bright and happy for the residents of the County Home this past holiday." Besides sending all contributors hand-written thank you notes, she offered public thanks to numerous businesses like Albaugh & Babylon Grocery Co. and T.W. Mather & Son. Additional thanks went to Taneytown Presbyterian and Lutheran churches, Western Maryland College Sunday School, and the Aid Society of the Church of the Brethren to name a few.

In 1919, Mary Shellman was out of town and surrendered her job to *The Times* newspaper and the Steward at the Almshouse. Local church leaders continued the County Home Christmas custom for many years to follow.

Guest columnist Beverly Humbert is a volunteer at the Carroll County Farm Museum where she serves as an Almshouse guide and School Marm.



Image 1 – (Courtesy photo) – Before becoming part of the Carroll County Farm Museum, these buildings were the County Home which began as the Carroll County Almshouse in 1853. The Steward, his family, women, and children lived in the large brick house while men lived in the frame building.



Image 2 – (Historical Society of Carroll County) – For many years, Mary Bostwick Shellman organized Christmas celebrations for the poor and needy residents of the County Home.



Image 2 – (Carroll County Farm Museum) The replica Almschouse Room at the Carroll County Farm Museum is decorated as it might have been at Christmas time when the Almschouse was in operation.