

Carroll County Times “Carroll’s Yesteryears” Articles

"Carroll County's 'almshouse' Has Rich History"

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By Mary Ann Ashcraft

When Maryland's legislature approved the formation of Carroll County in 1837, it required the citizens to build a courthouse, jail, register's office, clerk's office and a poorhouse. The first two buildings were finished quickly, but the "Poorhouse," also called the "Almshouse" or "County Home" wasn't started until 1852.

That year the county commissioners purchased 307 acres on the outskirts of Westminster and constructed a facility which served the indigent until 1965 when it was turned into the Carroll County Farm Museum. The first residents moved in at the end of May 1853.

Poor people in the nineteenth century had almost no safety net, so an almshouse was essential. It housed county residents down on their luck, but hobos and tramps could count on getting a meal and temporary lodging. Occasionally criminals and the insane were also in residence. Those able to do farm work helped raise food for themselves.

A salaried steward, who oversaw the operation, was assisted by a matron, a teamster, a fireman, a maid, and a washwoman. The steward and his family lived on the second floor of the main building we see today. Women residents lived on the third floor and there was a men's dormitory as well.

According to the 1860 census, John Buckingham was the steward. His wife and son lived with him and there were twenty-one residents ranging in age from a 90-year-old woman named Dinah, to 4-year-old Edward Thompson, who lived with his mother, Catharine, and an older brother. The almshouse was an integrated institution and, with one or two exceptions, everyone that year had been born in Maryland.

Ten years later, another steward supervised 47 residents. Frederica Bentz, her two-month-old daughter, and a young son were among them. There was a smattering of foreign-born residents – Germans, English, and Irish – but most were born in Maryland. Some inhabitants listed their occupations as cooper, tailor, shoemaker, blacksmith, and ditcher.

In 1880, Steward James J. Koller supervised 38 people ranging in age from John Bracket, under a year, to George Warfield who was 90 and the residents' occupations included seamstress, cook, laborer, stone mason, chambermaid and cooper. Clearly, some of the inhabitants could carry their own weight.

The Democratic Advocate of April 4, 1891, published extracts from a report on the status of jails and almshouses in central Maryland counties. Carroll's almshouse was described as "situated on a beautiful farm of one hundred and seventy acres, about one mile from the town. Mr. Emanuel Shaffer, the superintendent [steward], showed us through the buildings. The total number of inmates was 69, of whom 24 were women, 39 men and 6 children. Fourteen of the inmates were colored. Most of the inmates are old and decrepit but a few of them are able to assist somewhat in housework and chores." Although the main building was considered "in excellent condition," the men's building was considered "shocking," "dirty," and "not fit for occupancy."

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Carroll's almshouse not only served the local poor, but in 1890 it provided lodging and food to 2,501 tramps who drifted through. Obviously, it was a much-needed institution for many years.



This large brick building, now part of the Carroll County Farm Museum, was built in 1852-53 as the county's almshouse/poorhouse. It saw over 100 years of service before its conversion to a museum in the 1960s. Collection of the Historical Society of Carroll County.

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