ALMSHOUSES IN MARYLAND
by Rob Schoeberlein

Almshouses once served as the primary institutions for the housing and care of the poor and homeless. Few people, however, realize that the blind, lame, chronically ill, epileptic, developmentally disabled and mentally ill also shared the same quarters. In addition to the resident population, the almshouse offered aid to the transient poor by providing a meal and temporary shelter. Such institutions first appeared in Colonial America during the 1660s. Maryland founded its first almshouses in the 1760s, with most counties setting up their own during the nineteenth century. Though the demographics of the inhabitants changed over time, these institutions persisted until the 1960s when government assistance programs made them obsolete.

During the Colonial period, poor relief in Maryland was coordinated at the county level. The Levy Court of each county supervised the payments for the care of the poor, the dependent and the mentally ill. Persons without family or relatives to provide care were boarded with community members. In certain cases, a direct payment allowed the poor to remain within their own homes.

With a growing population, the need for assistance and the financial burden on the counties increased accordingly. In 1766 about forty percent of Worcester County's expenditures went for housing the poor in private homes. Almost one-seventh of the families in Anne Arundel County received aid by the late 1760s. In 1765 a bill was proposed in the General Assembly to found institutions for the poor and "houses of correction" for the confinement of vagabonds. Legislation finally passed in 1768 to establish the first almshouses in Anne Arundel, Prince George's, Worcester, Frederick and Charles counties.

Besides being places to aid the poor, these institutions served as mechanisms for social control by removing what the public considered undesirable persons from the greater community. The 1768 law gave unconditional power to the county trustees of the poor "for setting the poor to work, and punishing vagrants, beggars, vagabonds and other offenders." Inspired by a 1697 English law, the act stipulated that all almshouse residents must wear the letter "P" (for poor or poorhouse) on their clothing. Authorities in Maryland (as elsewhere in America) sometimes arrested and placed homeless or unruly people they considered a public nuisance into almshouses.

Almshouses were often located on the outskirts of a town or in a rural area on farmland. The farm employed and provided food for the almshouse inhabitants (called inmates). Some facilities featured a workhouse, where certain residents might weave cloth, sew clothing, or perform other labor to help pay for their upkeep. During the late 1830s, several Eastern Shore almshouses planted stands of mulberry trees, as habitat for silk worms, to help defray the cost of

administration by harvesting raw silk. The Maryland climate ultimately proved hostile to the enterprise, and it was abandoned.

The county trustees of the poor or a grand jury empowered by the county circuit court periodically examined the conditions of the almshouse. The 1874 founding of the Maryland State Board of Health led to the first regular state inspections. Officials during the 1890s found that almshouse conditions varied in the different counties. Generally speaking, more modest accommodations were found in the less wealthy counties. Yet, fancy brick facades often hid the same troubling circumstances inside. Lax administration characterized the sparsely furnished settings of most almshouses. Superintendents, often local farmers appointed through political influence, sometimes changed yearly. Inspections speak of the "almshouse diet", a subsistence diet of hominy or oatmeal as the daily fare for residents. A local doctor would visit on an "as needed" basis only, with few medicines kept on the premises in case of sickness. Though most institutions in Maryland practiced racial segregation at this time, certain county almshouses did not bother due to the added expense of having two separate buildings.

Reform movements in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries helped improve conditions and remove certain individuals from the almshouse setting. Children were transferred to orphanages. A protracted campaign of some thirty years by the Maryland State Lunacy Commission prompted the state legislature to pass a law in 1910 to move the mentally ill into hospitals. Yet this left the developmentally disabled and epileptic individuals to languish in the almshouses. From the 1920s onward, more and more of the almshouse inhabitants tended to be the elderly and the chronically ill. The number of residents declined starting in the 1950s with the founding of additional state hospitals and the extension of government assistance programs such as Social Security.

Almshouses as institutions, renamed the less offensive "county home" in the twentieth century, continued to operate in a few counties until the early 1960s. Some former almshouse buildings have been torn down; others still stand though little evidence of their past use remains. Baltimore County's almshouse presently houses the county historical society. One Eastern Shore almshouse serves today as a bed and breakfast. The facility in Anne Arundel County functions an an integral part of Historic London Town and Gardens.

For another overview of poor relief and almshouses in Maryland, see
http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/mdmanual/18dhr/html/dhrf.html

For more information on the Baltimore Almshouse, see
http://mdhistoryonline.net/mdmedicine/cfm/dsp_hospitalinfo.cfm?id=411

For more information on the Anne Arundel County Almshouse, see
http://www.historiclondontown.com/index.html

An exhibition tracing the removal of the mentally ill from almshouses is located here:
http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/speccol/sc5400/sc5492/html/almshouse.html

Volunteers Recognized

On January 10 the Archives recognized the much appreciated efforts put forth by its volunteers during the past year at a luncheon in the Search Room. Dr. Edward C. Papenfuse presented certficiates of appreciation to each of the attendees. Two of the volunteers have recently joined roster of Archives of employees: Leslie Frazer as Ed's administrative assistant and Cathy Blancato as archival assistant. Those unable to attend the luncheon will receive certificates by mail.

Volunteers and staff included in the above photograph include Mike McCormick, Director of Reference Services, Leslie Frazer, Carson Gibb, Rick Johnson, Pat Kuehlman Rumney, Dr. Edward C. Papenfuse, Trish Surles, Paul Frazer, Tom McCarrier, Pat Leyendecker, Claire Albert, Joe Howard, Alberta Stornetta, Peggy Wright, and Cathy Blancato

Archives Exhibit in Miller Senate Building Updated for 2006 Session
by Mimi Calver

The exhibit "Four Centuries of Stories from the Collections of the Maryland State Archives" has been updated with new objects and text to give it a fresh look for the opening of the 2006 Session of the General Assembly.

Three cases have been changed entirely with new themes and objects. Case 4 is now devoted to Maryland's nickname The Old Line State and traces the probable origins of the name to the Battle of Long Island during the Revolutionary War. The text and objects for this case were developed by Ryan Polk.

Case 6, which was devoted to the life and career of Frederick Douglass last year, has been expanded to tell the stories of enslaved men and women in Maryland and their attempts to escape from bondage. It is entitled "Beyond the Underground: The Flight to Freedom in Maryland" and is a joint effort of the staff of the Underground Rail Road project, including Chris Haley, John Gartrell, and Maya Davis.

The final new case is about elections and voting in Maryland through the centuries and is called "To the Free & Independent Voters." It covers campaign literature and other election artifacts from the 18th through the late 20th centuries and has been the project of Jen Hafner and Owen Lourie.

Most of the other cases have also been refreshed with new material and objects and images. The Revolutionary Annapolis case has been augmented with text and images relating to the Society of the Cincinnati and features an original certificate awarded to Levin Winder who served in the Maryland Line and as governor. His certificate was signed by George Washington and Henry Knox. The certificate design was the work of Charles-Pierre L'Enfant who also did the original design and layout of the new capital city, Washington D.C. Chris Kintzel did the research on the Society for the case.

Case 3, "Fighting Mary: Life Aboard the USS Maryland," sports an unusual new object: a large lamp made by the crew of the USS Maryland fire control unit from a 50 caliber artillery shell in 1929. It was presented to Charles C. Camara whose family has donated many USS Maryland objects to the Archives, including the ship's silver service which is also on display. Elaine Rice Bachmann has done all of the research and writing for this case.

Vicki Lee and Jenn Cruickshank assisted with conservation work for several elements of the exhibit.

THE ARCHIVISTS' BULLDOG
Founded 1987

Edward C. Papenfuse, *State Archivist*
Patricia V. Melville, *Editor*
Mimi Calver, *Assistant Editor*
Lynne MacAdam, *Web Editor*

The Maryland State Archives is an independent agency in the Office of the Governor and is advised by the Hall of Records Commission. The Chairman of the Hall of Records Commission is the Honorable Robert M. Bell, Chief Judge of the Maryland Court of Appeals.

The Archivists' *Bulldog* is issued monthly to publicize records collections, finding aids, and other activities of the Archives and its staff.

The Editor welcomes editorial comments and contributions from the public.

The Archives maintains a web site on the Internet at http://mdsa.net

---

Tell Us What You Think About the Maryland State Archives Website!

[Archives' Home Page || All About Maryland || *Maryland Manual On-Line* || Reference & Research || Education & Outreach || *Archives of Maryland Online*]

Governor   General Assembly   Judiciary   Maryland.Gov

© Copyright January 17, 2006 Maryland State Archives