

in the late eighteenth century, persons receiving relief outside of the almshouse were known as out-pensioners and received an annual pension from the county tax levy after an authorizing act was passed by the State legislature. Initially, out-pensions seem to have been granted to those who were bedridden or "whose peculiar circumstances may render a situation in the poor-house particularly unsuitable for them" (Chapter 65, Acts of 1799). The 1799 law clarified that counties with almshouses could also have out-pensioners. Annually, the legislature passed laws authorizing persons to receive a pension. These laws indicate that many out-pensions went to relatives caring for orphaned children or a lunatic family member. The 1799 law limited to ten the number of out-pensioners in each county and to thirty dollars the annual amount of each pension (Chapter 65, Acts of 1799), but counties continually modified the procedure and administration of their own poor laws through extensive legislative action.

Almshouses became the primary public institution for the destitute. The legislature in 1768, recognizing that "the necessity, number and continual increase, of the poor within this province is very great, and exceedingly burthensome," passed an act to relieve the poor by creating almshouses, or workhouses, in five counties (Chapter 29, Acts of 1768). Almshouses later were built in other counties. The concept behind almshouses was punitive: the original act vested absolute power in each county's five Trustees of the Poor "for the better relieving, regulating and setting the poor to work, and punishing vagrants, beggars, vagabonds and other offenders" (Chapter 29, Acts of 1768). Initially, persons were sentenced to the almshouse, and required to wear a badge on their sleeve with an emblazoned "P" for pauper. This punitive attitude towards the poor also was reflected in the State's first Constitution, which did not allow persons without property to vote. They were disenfranchised until a constitutional amendment was adopted in 1801 (Chapter 90, Acts of 1801).

Because the intent was to make the inmates work for their upkeep, almshouses were situated on farms. However, during most of their history, almshouses were not self-supporting and relied on county tax levies. In 1838, a statewide flurry of interest in silk cultivation resulted in legislation enabling eight counties to embark on that profit-making scheme in their almshouses (Chapters 77, 90, 160, 170, 192, 221, 231, and 296, Acts of 1838). Several counties planned to use profits to hire a teacher for the children of almshouse inmates, but no evidence indicates the scheme was implemented. As in farming, the trustees may have overestimated the abilities of their work force.

Almshouses survived in Maryland until after 1940 with little change except in the demography of their clientele. The poor and destitute perceived them as a last resort. Inmates were plagued by filth, vermin, inadequate diet, and the crowding together of persons with totally different needs. An 1877 report by the Secretary of the State Board of Health referred to one county almshouse as "a mockery of charity and a nursery of pollution." Almshouses provided relief to people who had no family or friends to support them in the community. Most commonly they were mothers and children, the elderly, insane, feeble-minded, alcoholic, blind, deaf, and other physically handicapped. Vagrants and lunatics, if not in the almshouse, were likely to be confined in the county jail. Almshouses reflected the optimistic faith of the early nineteenth century in the efficacy of institutions in solving, or at least hiding, societal ills. That belief in institutions led to the creation of more specialized institutions which eventually reshaped almshouse populations. Children were the first to leave. An 1886 law prohibited the presence in an almshouse of any child aged three to sixteen years of age for more than ninety days, provided of course that the child was not "an unteachable idiot, an epileptic, or a paralytic, or otherwise so disabled or deformed as to render it incapable of labor or service." (Chapter 262, Acts of 1886). Those children removed from almshouses were to be placed by the Trustees of the Poor with a respectable family or in an institution. The trustees previously had authority to bind out pauper children and the children of free blacks and mulattoes as apprentices. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as the State built institutions for the insane, the feeble-minded, incurables, and training schools for the deaf and blind, these groups also gradually moved out of the almshouses. As early as 1817, counties could have committed their insane inhabitants to the Maryland Hospital, which became exclusively a hospital for the mentally ill in 1838. However, the number of insane persons confined in county almshouses and jails did not diminish, even when the second State hospital for the insane was built in 1894. Finally in 1911 the dependent insane were removed to State hospitals (Chapter 435, Acts of 1908).

From 1900 to 1940, almshouse residents increasingly became the elderly and chronically ill. In 1906, perhaps to relieve the stigma, almshouses were renamed as county homes (Chapter 32, Acts of 1906). Changing the name did not alleviate any of the problems. Special commissions reported to the Governor and legislature in 1931, 1933, 1938, and 1940 that conditions in almshouses were a disgrace to a civilized country, jeopardizing the health of their inmates. Nonetheless, until the State built its first chronic care hospitals, almshouse residents had no place to go.