

THE ALEXANDRIA ALMS HOUSE AND WORK HOUSE

By
Ruth M. Ward

According to "Jottings from the Annals of Alexandria" by James R. Caton, on February 5, 1800, an ordinance was passed in Alexandria to establish a poor house and work house. The ordinance specified that a keeper of this house was to be hired to provide room, board and clothing for the poor, to care for and provide room, board, and clothing for the poor, to care for and provide work for persons sent to the workhouse at the direction of a Justice of the Peace, and to take charge of all slaves sent there by their owners.

Soon after 1800, the Alexandria poor house was built in Alexandria County. It appears as the Alms House on the G.M. Hopkins 1878 map. It was a well-known landmark, and was still standing in 1933, at approximately the site of the present Alexandria Little League baseball field, on the right hand side of Route 1 just before Route 1 crosses the Potomac railroad yard bridge.

We have in our archives the ledger of one Robert Hodgkin, who was hired as the keeper of the alms house and work house in December, 1861, at twenty-six dollars a month, plus room and board for the members of his household. One side of the ledger starts with entries in the Day Book of the Alexandria Alms House. The other side of the book starts with November and December 1861 work house entries. The book lists purchases, inmates, and property inventories, and the terse entries reflect an interesting view of life in Alexandria County in the Civil War era.

Mr. Hodgkin's spelling was rudimentary — "medicin for sick", "Indelible ink to mark paupers cloath", "Paid for Alchihol and opium .52", "122# surrip sugar 7.32", and "2 boxes East cakes .37", but his records were periodically audited by a member of the Committee for the Poor, and were found to be accurate.

Soon after Mr. Hodgkin started his duties as keeper of the alms and work houses, an inmate arrived called only "the Smallpox man". He apparently was put in isolation in a cell in the work house, and a December 24, 1861 entry says, "Artickels furnished for Smallpox man, axe, saw and horse, bottel caster oil & 2 lb Epsom salts, pint whiskey, 2 lb ground coffee, pint & ½ pint mollasses, 8 lbs fresh pork, 1# lard. Sundrie artichel furnished by Jones McKenzie — matras blankets cups saucers plates & load wood."

On January 2, 1862, there was an entry for "33¢ quart whiskey for Smallpox man". A January 27, 1862 ledger item listed, "Goods Brt to poor house by Small pox man, 1 tin bucket, 2 tin cups, 2 knives & forks, 2 tin plates, 1 tea kettel, 1 skillet, 1 oven, 1 wood buckett, 2 blankets, 1 wood horse & axe, 1 candel stick". No further mention was made of the smallpox man.

When inmates became ill, they were treated with common remedies of the time. Among those mentioned in the ledger are: "Brandy & opium .18", "Alkohol & opium .52", "qt whiskey for sick folks .31", "asifedity, (asafetida, an antispasmodic) sulfer, campher .63", "campher, opium, alkihol .68", and "opium and laudinum .87".

Although some garden produce was raised at the Alms house, much of it was purchased, even during the summer. Fish, both fresh and salted, was served often. When available, fresh meat was used. Some coffee was bought, but there are entries that indicate that coffee was made from rye — "20 bushels rye for coffee". Flour, molasses, and Potomac herring were bought by the barrel. Cornmeal was usually bought in 20 bushel lots. A half-barrel of "herrings damaged" cost \$1.00. A barrel of pickled codfish was \$3.50. Ninety-nine pounds of salt beef cost \$7.92.

Two cows were kept on the premises, but butter was a purchased item. Also, bread apparently wasn't baked at the poor house, and "loaf bread" was a frequent item of purchase.

Many entries reflect that thrift was practiced, and worn-out or broken items were mended if possible — "repairs to plow .50", "Pd. for wire to mend lattern .10", "Pd. for repairing tin kettel .20", "Paid for mending wash boiler .20". For some reason the gate hinges had to be replaced at least three times within a few months, and new padlocks were purchased frequently.

On occasion, the keeper took in transient officers and men during the Civil War, feeding them supper, and bedding them on the parlor floor. He had some unfortunate experiences with his "Yankey" guests. A February 29, 1862, entry reads, "By Cash Received of Col Suiter of the 34 Redgement New York his amt as presented was \$18 and ought to have been in Justice \$36 but pd with a \$1.00 Shin plater".

He fared even worse a few days later, when the entry is: "Henry Ward Beecher Long Island Redge, supper for 15 officers & privates, at 38¢ each, \$5.70, Beds & bedding in parlor, \$6.00, an of next morning Yankey hikes without pay".

Transient military "guests" were not welcomed much longer at the alms house, and the last entry about them on March 30, 1862, states, "of Lutenant of Wisconsin Rege, cash for board and lodging, \$2.00, by cash tranzent solders \$2.00, by cash for 2 piggs stolen, \$3.00, by cash from officers & solders at sundri times, \$3.12".

A birth was recorded, with a comment — "Jany 5 1863, \$3.00 paid for delivering Pool Goins of her child who ought not to be here nor hardly any where else according to my opinion".

Deaths, too, were noted in the ledger. "Jany 8, 1862 — Jas Buckhannon died was buried in the Sothern Methodist burying ground. Funerel preached from these words, it is appointed to man once to dye and after that the judgement, his funerel expences cost \$11.00". A short entry for May 27, 1862,

says, "making coffin for dround boy, 3.50", and another for November 22, 1862, "Rec'd cash for board of German who died at poor house, \$10."

The ledger entries shed no light on who was responsible for the fact that the hogs at the alms house mysteriously began to sicken and die in late 1861. Mr. Hodgkin, the keeper, made this ledger entry concerning the strange circumstances in connection with the death of the hogs: "Jany 4, 1862, Momorandom of hogs died within the last 6 weeks up to January 4th 1862. Fore or five within the last three week of Mr. Steven staying at the poor house and 5 since R. Hodgkin has been at the poor house. The hog that died on Saturday the 4th January 1862 R.H. took to Alex. the same hog which was fat enough for pork and would have weighed 50 lb dresed, and had the same hog examined by Doc Winsell who pronounced positively the hog had been poisoned. Testified to by R. Hodgkin Jany 4th, 1862." The last mention of the poisoning of the hogs was, "Jany 11, 1862 Saturday morning 1 hogg died in the same way by fits was fat and have weghed at least 100 lb."

The ledger entries dealing with the work house indicate that most inmates were sent there for thirty days, although some were sentenced to six months. Mothers serving time brought their children with them. Some entries indicate inadequate security measures: "John Crisman, sent to work house for 30 days, ran away before a fire could be made in his cell". "Kate Thompson, vagrant, 30 days, run away in my absence".

In January 1862, the keeper wrote an inventory of people, animals, household furnishings, and farming equipment. He listed thirty-eight inmates, plus eight members of his own household. There were three horses, two cows, one bull, and nineteen hogs.

Under "things in house", were "21 Iron Bed Stids 10 old wood Bedstids 1 maple bedstid 24 old Small feather beds 12 old sheets, 10 old blankets, 31 old quilts & bedspreads, the inmates scarcely any cloaths or shoes or stockings. For the kitchen furniture and house furniture 5 old worn stoves, one safe in pasage one old burow 6 old tabels 18 old chairs 8 knives & forks, very old, 12 spoons iron 12 earth plates 14 bowls, 6 old cups & saucers 24 pillows, 12 old cotton bedspreads, 10 straw beds 2 bukets, 10 tin plates, a coffee boiler, one work stand, 8 knives & forks, grind stone 20 hens 5 ducks 4 roosters 4 chickens. All of which have been layed before the committee on the poor R. Hodgkin".

Listed under "farming utensials", were "3 old ploughs, 2 old harrows lot of old hoes, 1 old spade, 3 old shovels, 3 old broken forks, 1 cutting box, lot of old harness, one old wagon & harness one road or street cart & 3 old garbage carts, lot of provender hay straw fodder & shucks, about 20 bushels horse feed, 3 sholders bacon a small quantity of salt beef in the bottom of a barrel, 4 or five barrels fish herrings about 2 bushels ears of corn, I suppose about 20 bush oats as I had no measure by which to asertian the quality, sack salt half barrel of fine salt one double shovel plow".

The Alexandria poor house served its intended purpose for 126 years. In about 1928, the inmates were transferred to a new district poor farm in Manassas. It was noted at the time of the transfer that one inmate who was being moved had lived at the poor house for forty years.