



This month's *Found in the Archives* examines public welfare offered by Fairfax County during hard financial times during the 18th and 19th centuries.

In Colonial Virginia, help for the poor was provided through local church parishes, an English system largely springing from the Elizabethan Poor Laws. Church vestries raised funds through a capitation tax or 'tithes' on all males over the age of sixteen,

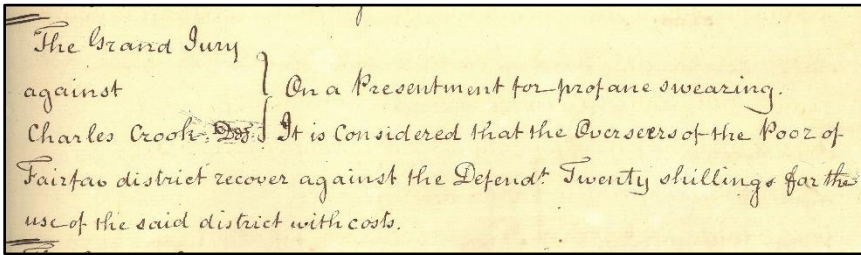
heads of households (whether male or female) and non-white women also over sixteen. Churchwardens kept a list of 'deserving' impoverished people and disseminated money, food, clothes and other necessities, where they saw fit. Men who were physically able to work, but did not seek employment, were seen as undeserving.



Pohick Church, Courtesy of Pohick Episcopal Church

After the American Revolution, the Anglican Church in the United States was dissolved – this included the parish vestries that oversaw the well-being of the poor in their communities. To address the need to continue providing welfare to the destitute, the Virginia General Assembly passed an act requiring each county to elect Boards of Overseers of the Poor to serve the previous parish districts (in Fairfax County, these would be Fairfax and Truro Parishes). Passed in October 1785, the act delineated, in great detail, how counties were to achieve this. *Hening's Statutes at Large*, Vol. 12, Ch. IV, tells us that the Overseers were to be unencumbered property owners, and 'discreet, fit, and proper persons' (and male). They were to serve their parishes for three years, after which new elections were to be held. Elections for these positions were to be publicly advertised by the Sheriff and presided over by an appointed Superintendent of Elections. The Overseers were to meet annually to assess tax levies of money or tobacco on persons listed as 'tithable' by Court. With these funds, they were to provide support to 'poor, lame, impotent, blind, and other inhabitants of their said county as are not able to maintain themselves'. The levies were to be

collected by the Collector of the Public Taxes who had to take out a separate bond for this addition to his duties. Corporation towns were to run the same system, but use Magistrates instead of Overseers.



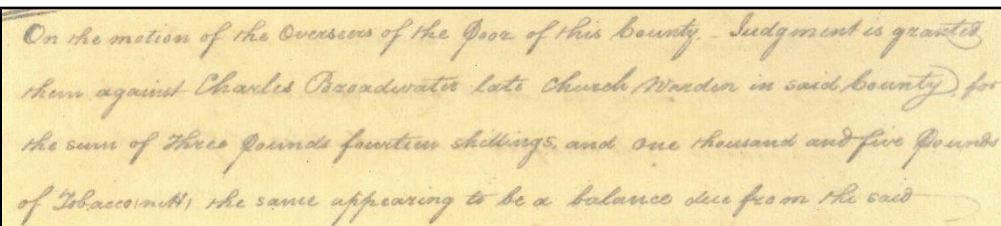
The Grand Jury
against
Charles Crook. } On a Presentment for profane swearing.
It is Considered that the Overseers of the Poor of
Fairfax district recover against the Defend^t Twenty shillings for the
use of the said district with costs.

Fairfax Minute Book 1783, p. 417, 19 June 1787

In Fairfax County, the Overseers' funds also came from court fines. In June 1787, the Overseers collected 20 shillings and court costs from Charles Crook and another man for using profanities in public. 'Profane swearing' was a big offense in 18th

century Virginia, and the court order books for this time contain many profanity prosecutions. The Overseers of the Poor received multiple awards from this type of case. Interestingly, swearing in public is still a punishable offense in Fairfax County (Code of Virginia § 18.2-416).

Another source of funds for the poor appeared with an amended act in 1787. Overseers were allowed to hire out vagrants for up to three months and put their earnings into the Poor Fund. In 18th century Virginia, a vagrant was considered to be any able-bodied man who didn't work or who begged for a living. The Virginia Assembly stated that anyone keeping a gaming-table or betting bank should also be considered a vagrant. In the following century, funds were also derived from Fairfax County loans and the Board of Overseers' land ownership. Also, a record in the 1846 Minute Book of a runaway slave, James Henry Field, indicates that he was to be hired out for the Overseers' benefit while in jail.

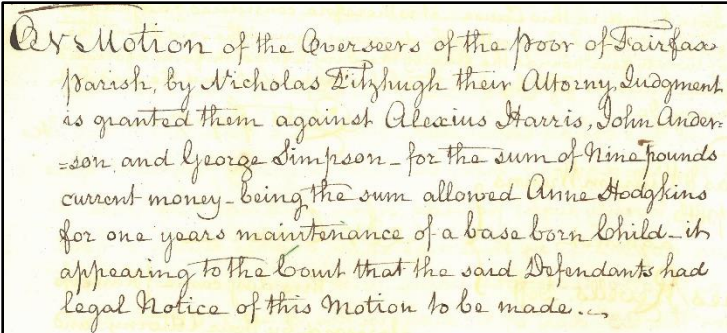


On the motion of the Overseers of the Poor of this County - Judgment is granted
them against Charles Broadwater late Church Warden in said County, for
the sum of three pounds fourteen shillings, and one thousand and five pounds
of Tobacco (with) the same appearing to be a balance due from the said

Fairfax Minute Book 1788, p. 211, 19 October 1789

One of the stipulations of the 1785 Act was that the Overseers would settle the old Anglican parish accounts regarding care of the poor with the

churchwardens. The Overseers were to receive any money levied for this purpose, and (following a further act in 1786) had the power to sue churchwardens who didn't settle their accounts in a timely manner. In October 1789, the Overseers were awarded £3, 14 shillings and 1,005 pounds of tobacco in fines against Charles Broadwater, and £7, 15 shillings, 11 pence and 1,049 pounds of tobacco in fines against Thomazin Ellzey, both late churchwardens.

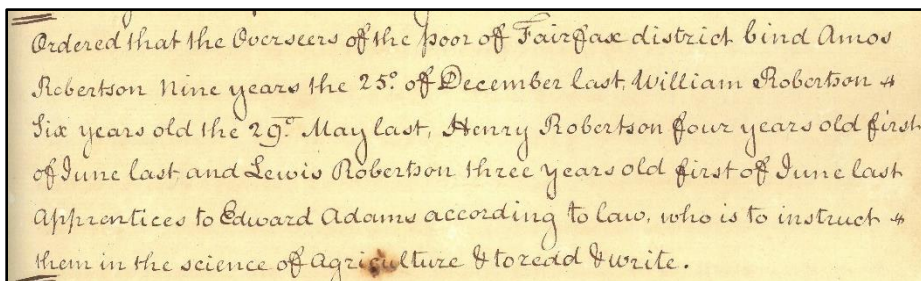


A Motion of the Overseers of the Poor of Fairfax Parish, by Nicholas Fitzhugh their Attorney, Judgment is granted them against Alexius Harris, John Anderson and George Simpson - for the sum of Nine Pounds current money - being the sum allowed Anne Hodgkins for one years maintenance of a base born child - it appearing to the Court that the said Defendants had legal Notice of this Motion to be made.

Fairfax Minute Book 1799, p. 30, 18 June 1799

Robert Thrift for supporting his illegitimate child with Mary Blackburn. In June 1799, the Overseers were awarded £9 against three different men for one year's maintenance of Anne Hodgkins' 'base-born' child. The subsequent award for care of Anne's child whittled the number of potential fathers down to two, and the final award culminated in one man being held financially responsible – Elexius Harris. The Overseers continued to collect like forms of child maintenance well into the 19th century. In August 1836, John Reardon was ordered to pay \$20 annually, until his daughter was seven. Similar cases also specified time limits and boys usually benefitted a little longer than girls. In one case from March 1849, the father, Pearson Croson, was declared insolvent and unable to pay. The Court released him from his obligation.

The Overseers of the Poor were also directed to sue fathers of illegitimate children for funds to support the child and mother, to prevent them becoming a burden on the Poor Fund. This duty too, had once been performed by the churchwardens. In April 1789, the Overseers for Fairfax Parish were charged with collecting £30 from



Ordered that the Overseers of the Poor of Fairfax district bind Amos Robertson nine years the 25th of December last, William Robertson 4 Six years old the 29th May last, Henry Robertson four years old first of June last and Lewis Robertson three years old first of June last Apprentices to Edward Adams according to law, who is to instruct & them in the science of Agriculture & to read & write.

Fairfax Minute Book 1783, p. 251, 19 June 1786

Overseers to bind out certain orphans as apprentices. This enabled them to learn a trade and, hopefully, to be able to support themselves once they became adults. Another act in 1786 gave Overseers the authority to set-up children as apprentices if their parents were incapable of raising them (through poverty or otherwise). The court order above shows brothers Amos, William, Henry and Lewis Robertson being apprenticed to learn the 'science of agriculture.' All four of them were younger than 10 years old at the time of the order.

A further duty inherited from the Churchwardens was the care of orphans. The 1785 Act required the Overseers to make monthly reports to the court of orphans within their parishes.

The court would then direct the

Eventually, the Overseers took over all types of apprenticeship and indentures. But even middle-class parents could apprentice their children to learn more elevated professions, such as the 1793 binding of Thomas Triplett to Elisha C. Dick to learn the 'science of medicine.'

Thomas later became Dr. Triplett, and both men frequently appear in our deed books as wealthy men.

With a number of onerous duties, it isn't surprising that both Fairfax and Truro parishes had difficulty in retaining their elected Overseers in the first fifteen years of their existence. A minute book entry from 1786 records that Fairfax parish Overseers, John Moss and James Wren, refused to serve following their appointment. In 1787, all three Overseers for Truro parish refused to continue to serve and new elections were called. Court Clerk, Peter Wagener, was elected in this way. An amended act passed later that year by the Virginia Assembly aimed to prevent such actions by fining elected and able-bodied Overseers, if they neglected their duties. Two Fairfax Parish Overseers, William Hartshorne and William Adams were prosecuted in 1791 for their non-performance.

Men elected to this position were the wealthier landowners with prominent business concerns of their own, and likely to have other public commissions. In the 18th century, notable Fairfax County families were represented by Overseers such as Nicholas Fitzhugh, Presly Gunnell, Thomas Darne, Rezin Offutt, John Moss and John and Roger West. Prior churchwardens, such as Charles Broadwater and Thomazin Ellzey were also elected. The Overseers expenses were paid, but as their role was considered to be a kind of community service they did not receive any other compensation. Over time, the Virginia Assembly created positions to assist the Overseers, such as Collector of the Poor Rate (1787), Clerk to record proceedings (1787) and Agent of the Board of Overseers (1816) who monitored their business, attended their meetings and kept all property appropriated by them. These positions received compensation. Charles Broadwater became Fairfax Parish's first Agent in June 1816. Broadwater's bond was \$6,000, set at twice the amount of property expected to be held by him that year. After presenting his accounts at the May 1817 term of court, Broadwater received a six percent commission on the money he disbursed to the poor.

It is ordered that Simon Somers be summoned to appear here on the first day of next Court to shew cause if any he can why the Court should not direct the Sheriff of this County to distrain and sell so much of his estate as may be necessary to refund to the Overseers of the Poor of this County the sums by them expended for the support and maintenance of a negro Sarah a free black emancipated by him and who it is stated was of unsound mind and body at the time of her said emancipation and also so much as may be necessary to provide for her future

Fairfax Minute Book 1819, p. 211, 19 June 1820

The county courts had the right to overrule the Overseers and compel them to provide medical care, food and housing to people who had been denied. Likewise, the Overseers could demand reimbursements for aid obtained fraudulently. Simon Somers emancipated his slave, Sarah, when she became of 'unsound mind and body'. This resulted in her being

supported by the Overseers, rather than Somers. In June 1820, Fairfax County Court determined that Somers was legally responsible for Sarah's welfare and ordered him to refund the money disbursed by the Overseers and provide money for Sarah's future.



Northampton County Poorhouse, VA, courtesy of www.poorhousestory.com

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the most visible aspect of public aid for the poor was the poorhouse. Our minute books contain several references to a poorhouse in Fairfax County. In October 1801, the Overseers ordered William Payne and William Gunnell to purchase a piece of land of 50 acres or less to construct a poorhouse. For reasons unknown, the Overseers petitioned the Court to sell the poorhouse and lot in 1838. In 1841, a new poorhouse was purchased, which served the 'inside' poor. Recipients of aid from the Overseers who were able to support their households through working at home were called 'outside' poor.

Fairfax County had several iterations of poorhouse and work farms which were used until 1927, when Prince William, Culpeper, Fairfax, and Fauquier Counties, and the city of Alexandria merged their poorhouses into one facility, located in Manassas. In 1930, the County established a committee to explore the cost of repairing the old poorhouse for reinvention as a 'detention home'. We do not know the result.

BUDGET ESTIMATES

PREPARED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PROVISIONS OF SECTION 1 OF CHAPTER 37 OF THE
ACTS OF ASSEMBLY OF 1927.

CLASSIFICATION	YEAR ENDED JUNE 30, 1928		Appropriation Year Ending June 30, 1929	APPROPRIATION YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 1930			
	Appropriation	Expenditure		Proposed	Increase Over Year Ending June 30, 1929	Decrease Under Year Ending June 30, 1929	Allowed by Board of Supervisors
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
The Poor	3500.00	5089.00	3500.00	6000.00	2500.00		5,000.00

Board of Supervisors' Proposed County Budget for 1929

In 1870, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors was established. The Overseers of the Poor now operated under their jurisdiction, rather than the courts, with leadership headed by the newly-created office of Superintendent of the Poor. The Board of Supervisors' minutes show continued use of the Poor Account for the outside poor. They also make mention of the Overseers of the Poor up to 1930. By 1932, the office of the Superintendent of the Poor was replaced by the Superintendent of Public Welfare. The Social Security Act of 1935 established state-run aid for the poor, and changed the face of public welfare.

For more information on these and other records held at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center, please call 703-246-4168 or email CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov.

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