

Poorhouse 1878

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



In previous newsletters, we have looked at how the Fairfax County Courts aided impoverished county citizens. This month, we examine the county Poorhouse through the reports and accounts of the Superintendent of the Poor (and manager of the poorhouse), T. T. Burke, and the Board of Supervisors. These records cover the Poorhouse financial year from October 1877 to October 1878, and contain a wealth of socio-economic information.



In 1877, Fairfax County's Poorhouse was located on the Colchester Road at Sangster's Station. As can be seen on the map at left, it was still known by its much older designation: "The Alms House." Opening its doors in 1842, the Poorhouse had been through the Civil War, witnessing two engagements, including the Battle of Sangster's Station. Perhaps driven by harsher economic times after the War, it had also seen a dramatic increase in residents, leading the Board of Supervisors to declare it 'full to capacity' by 1877.

[Hopkins Atlas, p. 69, Centreville District, 1879](#)

Editor Fairfax Messenger,
publishing proposals for repairing the Poor House..... 2.58

[Board of Supervisors' Allowances, Year 1877, Fairfax Messenger, March 1, 1878](#)

As the newspaper clip at left shows, the Board of Supervisors invited proposals for repairing and updating the Poorhouse. To increase capacity, they also gave T. T. Burke approval for constructing a new building on the Poorhouse grounds, and a committee was established to receive and approve construction proposals.

It app. that P. A. Building has been completed, on mo. the same was accepted and ordered that a check for \$262, be drawn in favor of J. W. Ashford the contractor who has been ordered that Council, on new building at Poor House, be authorized to receive proposals for painting ^{and} guttering ^{said house} at the lowest bid, and fixing the cellar door, and to contract for the same.

Board of Supervisors Poor House Meeting Notes, August 17, 1878

committee 'to receive proposals for painting and guttering said house at the lowest bid, and fixing the cellar door'.


According to rough notes made during a Board of Supervisors meeting about the Poorhouse, the contractor chosen for the new building was J. W. Ashford, a carpenter and lumber supplier. He was paid \$262. Wary of spending too much public money, the Board of Supervisors authorized the

Fairfax Co. Dr. to
White washing New house on the poor
farm four Dollars & no more \$4.00
August. 13, 1878 D. B. Ferguson

Superintendent of the Poor to D. B. Ferguson, August 13, 1878

house on the poor farm' several days before the 'Poor House Meeting'. Later, John McKey was paid \$40 for painting the new building. During 1878, Burke also laid out expenditure on maintaining the old building, paying Henry Davis \$2.75 for 'work on [the] seller[sic].'

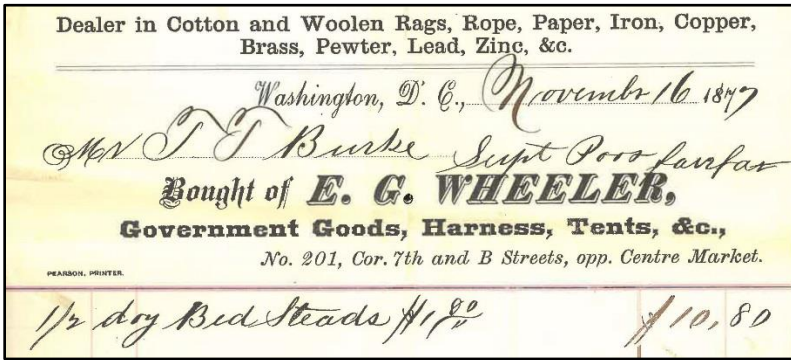
Apparently, T. T. Burke had not waited for the Board of Supervisors' permission to begin updating the new building. As this receipt shows, D. B. Ferguson was paid \$4 to whitewash the 'New



This Certifies, That T. T. Burke Superintendent of Poor
in the County of Fairfax
Virginia, has this 21 day of August 1878 made
application to the Independent Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Fairfax County, Virginia,
for Insurance against loss by Fire, upon the Property specified in said Appli-
cation, to the amount of 500 Dollars;

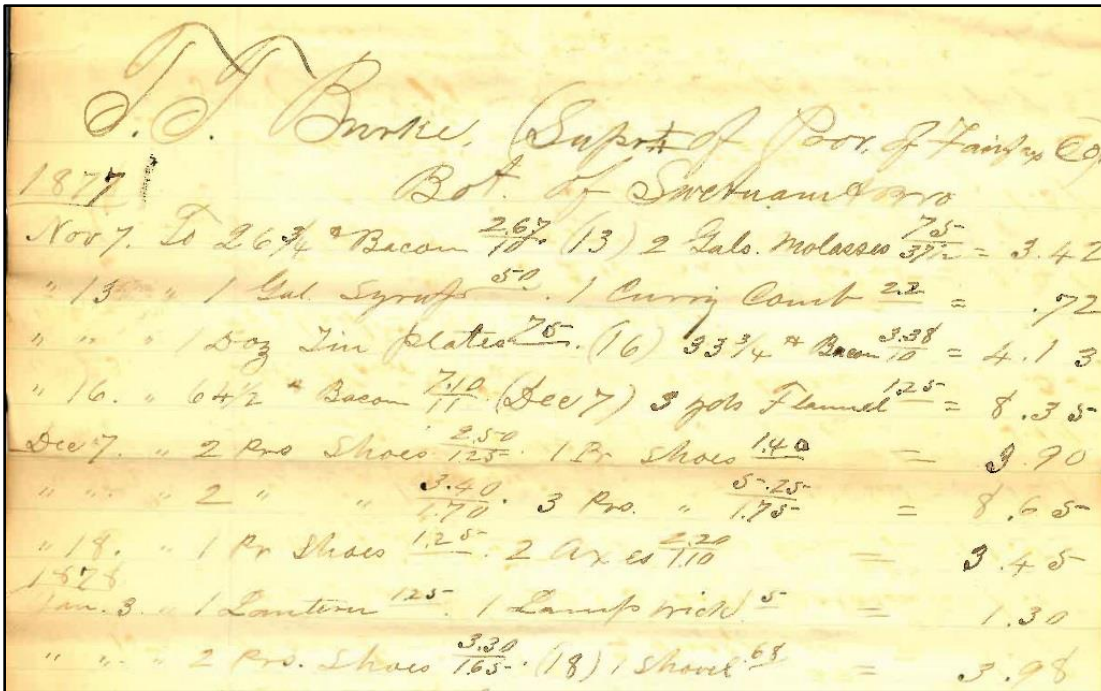
T. T. Burke's Application for Fire Insurance, August 21, 1878

To protect the County's investment, Burke took out a new fire insurance policy on the Poorhouse buildings, estimating the total value of the property to be \$500.



Superintendent of the Poor in Account with E. G. Wheeler, November 16, 1877

clothing, and fifteen blankets. Most of these early receipts were from Washington, D. C. merchants, such as the one above.



Superintendent of the Poor in Account with Swetnam & Bro., November 1878

extract, T. T. Burke kept running accounts at several local stores, paying them at the end of each financial year. A large portion of these items were foodstuffs which the Poorhouse farm could not provide, such as coffee, tea and flour. Over the course of the year, Swetnam & Bro., run by E. R. and Charles F. Swetnam, supplied the Poorhouse with 16 gallons of molasses, 6 ½ gallons of syrup and 226 pounds of sugar. W. E. Ford sold the Poorhouse a further 13 gallons of molasses.

The 29 residents of the Poorhouse at this time – 16 female and 13 male – were provided with basic commodities during their stay. At the beginning of the financial year, Burke purchased, among other things, 6 iron bedsteads, a dozen tin plates, a coffee pot, multiple pairs of shoes, flannel, denim, cotton, thread and buttons for making sturdy and simple

These purchases were supplemented throughout the year with smaller purchases from local merchants. The Hopkins Atlas map shown on the first page depicts the location of several of these businesses in Clifton and Fairfax Station. As can be seen in this store account

" 12 " 1/2 Cabbage Seed 20- 1 Pr Radish Seed = .31
 " " " Plow Point 40 (23) 20 1/4 Seed Corn 65 = 13.44
 13.04

Superintendent of the Poor in Account with Swetnam & Bro., November 1878

One of the guiding principles behind the creation of the poorhouse was self-sufficiency.

Poorhouses in less urban areas had farms, and were expected to grow the bulk of residents' food, selling any surplus to raise funds for next year's seeds and farming tools. In the spring and summer of 1878, Swetnam & Bro. sold Burke cabbage and radish seeds, two replacement plow points and a hoe. Burke bought other various implements such as shovels and buckets from different merchants throughout the year.

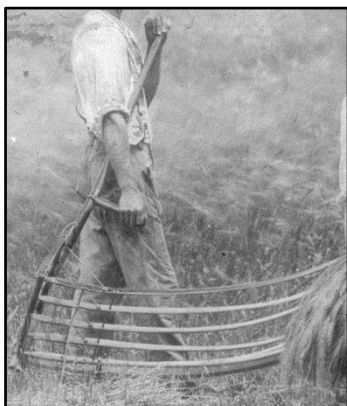
Whereas, I have obtained of L. MAKELY, certain *Fertilizer*
 to the amount of *Forty-five* DOLLARS.
 upon the promise made by *me* to send or deliver to the said L. MAKELY,
my crop of *Wheat* or so much thereof as may be necessary
 to pay the said sum of *forty-five* DOLLARS; now I do here-
 by bind *myself* to comply with the said promise above made as aforesaid.
 Given under *my* hand and seal, this *25* day of *Oct* 1877.
J. S. Burke Supt. of Poor

Superintendent of the Poor in Account with L. Makely, October 25, 1877

To ensure the Poorhouse's crops grew well, Burke purchased \$45 of fertilizer from merchant L. (Leander) Makely. As the Promissory Note at left reflects, rather than paying cash, Burke agreed to give Makely 'my crop of wheat or so much thereof as may be necessary to pay the said sum of forty-five Dollars'.

Thos J Birk Sr to
 Thos W Payne
 1 Bushel potatoes 15
 To Making new grain cradle
 And repairs — — — 225
 375

Superintendent of the Poor to Thomas W. Payne, June 22nd, 1878



Grain Cradle, Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

As well as buying tools from general merchants, Burke had farm implements made to order and mended by independent artisans. In June 1878, Thomas Payne was paid \$2.25 for making a grain cradle. A grain cradle is an implement attached to a scythe that scoops the cut stalks into little bundles as the grain is mowed (by hand). You can see an example of this in the photograph at left. Payne's bill also included 'repares', which may indicate repairs to a 'grain scythe [with] 8 cradle fingers' that Burke had purchased from W. E. Ford in the previous month.

Superintendent of the Poor Annual Report, November 1, 1878

Able-bodied poorhouse residents were expected to work on the farm to raise their own food. In reality, the majority of poorhouse residents were elderly or infirm and unable to work. In his 1878 Annual Report to the Board of Supervisors, Burke reported that ‘Non[e] Wer[e] abl[e] to work’. As was common practice in the running of poorhouses, Burke had to hire farm hands and a general housekeeper. Virginia Harris was contracted for 12 months to do unspecified work at \$4.50 per month

Superintendent of the Poor to Willis Elsey, March 25, 1878

At left is a sample of the type of work done by the Poorhouse’s hired hands. Willis Elsey was paid \$16.89 for ‘Grubling’ a portion of the farm. Grubbing is removing tree stumps and other debris from a field prior to

plowing. Other local men were paid for plowing, planting, harvesting and processing the fields and crops. T. T. Burke’s Annual Report recorded that the Poorhouse farm’s yield for that year was 98 bushels of wheat, 69 bushels of oats, 50 bushels of potatoes, 80 barrels of corn and 1400 lbs of pork. This was achieved by a handful of part-time, temporary farm hands.

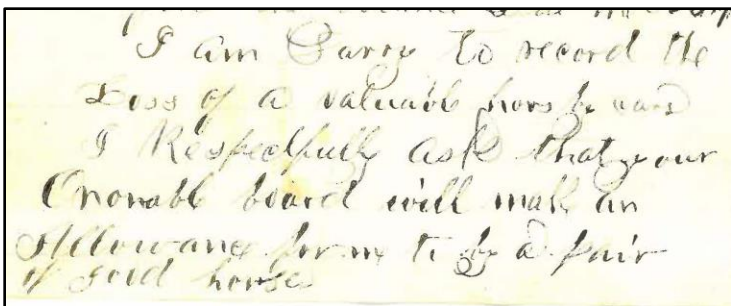
Superintendent of the Poor to Annie Gaskins, February 10th, 1878

The Annual Report stated that \$60 was spent on medical services throughout the year. One of these expenditures was for the services of midwife

Annie Gaskins. Annie was hired to attend Ella Ridgeway ‘in her confinement’, meaning during labor. Ella was in labor for two days and nights. Her son, James, died at or shortly after birth. The other two babies born at the Poorhouse in 1878 survived.

Superintendent of the Poor to J. W. Ashford, January 21, 1878

Four residents of the Poorhouse died during the year, two during the winter. As can be seen in the invoice at left, carpenter J. W. Ashford supplied coffins for Willis Miner and Cordela Rany on the same day they died.



I am sorry to record the
Loss of a valuable horse and
I Respectfully ask that your
Honorable Board will make an
Allowance from my tax for a pair
of good horse

Superintendent of the Poor Annual Report, November 1, 1878

Alongside the vital statistics and expenditure figures on the Annual Report, T. T. Burke recorded the 'Loss of a valuable horse' and 'Respectfully' asked the Board of Supervisors for a new pair of 'good horse.' Horses were vital for farming activities. This is the only full sentence in the report.

The men, women and children who resided at the Poorhouse do not have a large footprint in the historical record, since they did not own land, and left no personal property to be probated. But the Circuit Court Poorhouse records do reveal who these citizens were, and tell some of their story.

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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<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/circuit/historic-records-center>