

# The Chester County Poorhouse

BY CATHERINE QUILLMAN

County Home, near West Chester, Pa.



How our 19th-century forebears  
coped with the destitute

As early as 1800, the poor in Chester County had a place in the community. They lived at the Chester County Poorhouse, built on a 350-acre tract that was considered one of the most scenic regions of the county.

In recent years, the grounds were known as the State Police Barracks at Embreeville and are now in the news for being part of a contested proposed high-density development.

The original building—a stately 3-story brick structure with dormer windows—stood on a hilltop overlooking the West Branch of the Brandywine. From a distance, it resembled any other profitable farmstead of the region, with dairy cows and outbuildings. For the poor, this was no ordinary farm, of course. It served as an orphanage,

homeless shelter, battered women's refuge, lying-in hospital, nursing home and asylum.

The term “indoor relief” had been in use since the late 1700s, when names like “Poor Tom” and “Blind Betty” are found on the township tax rolls. These “paupers” were typically cared for in private homes, a great step up from the days when they were required to wear a scarlet “P” on their sleeves and risked being beaten or driven out of the county.

Still, there was nothing quite like the Chester County Poorhouse. It was the first of its kind in Pennsylvania, an “experiment” in welfare work practically invented by the Quakers. For the poor, it meant survival. For the taxpayer, it meant that the county's poor became everyone's responsibility.

Today you can hike a trail maintained by the Natural Lands Trust's Cheslen Preserve and visit “Potter's field,” or the poorhouse burial grounds. Many hikers I've spoken to see it as a way of honoring the poor and the forgotten, the latter especially true since the burial map was reportedly lost decades ago.

The poor are easily traced through the extensive poorhouse records found at the Chester County Archives in West Chester. They recall the stories of women like Mary McBride, who arrived during spring planting in 1844. The house Steward, Walker Yarnall, duly recorded her name in the ledger-sized admissions book. It was the first step in a meticulous process that would include a “testimony,” or intake interview to establish roots.

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Arrivals who owned or rented property for one year were considered residents of that township and the word “settled” would be affixed to their testimony. Married women or widows were considered residents of the place where their husbands had resided. McBride's case, though, proved more complicated. In anticipation of removing her to the Delaware County Poorhouse, Yarnall wrote the following letter on May 15, 1844: “We admitted on March 26 last in an advanced state of pregnancy, a woman who called herself Mary McBride, single, age 36. Said she was from England and had no residence. We yesterday admitted in a disturbed condition James

Hannum, a boy of 7 or 9 years old; in the course of the day we found that the woman calling herself McBride was the mother of the boy Hannum and widow of George Washington Hannum . . . please direct us how to dispose of her.” To further hammer home that McBride was “Not Our Pauper,” as Yarnall wrote with flourish on her transfer papers, he wrote to an East Whiteland farmer named Gheen, who was known for hiring day laborers. His words capture the ephemeral lives of the poor. “Gheen [says] he sometimes saw Washington Hannum about the White Horse Tavern and had him work half a day is all he known about him.”







JIM GRAHAM

Maximusam, ut id quiam quam eatisqu isquiam quibus solore volorereius, officit, quis arum escipic te

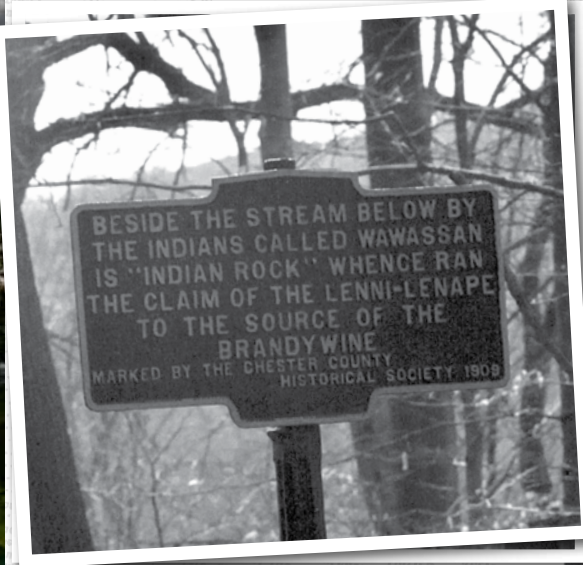
McBride was among the more desperate applicants, but many more were brought to the Poorhouse by well-meaning citizens. They appear in the *Steward's Reports* in shorthand form, such as this entry of 1822: “George Sherry, age XX and his wife Mary, age XX, pregnant, brought in from Birmingham by Edward Darlington’s son.”

Once admitted, the comings and goings of the inmates were carefully monitored by the Steward, who lived in one wing of the house, usually with a wife and children. Reading such accounts today, it’s easy to imagine that conditions were less than ideal. In January 1821, for instance, the Steward wrote that John Greenly and his son David, “absconded in the Night.”

For the most part, the Chester County Poorhouse was built in 1800 as a working farm. It was no Dickensian debtors’ prison. It had central heating and a steam laundry. Water was piped in from a nearby spring and the kitchen was equipped with a professional-grade range and coffee boiler. Children of a certain age had their own dining room and later a school.

That first year, Hannah Freeman, aka “Indian Hannah,” appears on the books as one of only two nonwhite “inmates.” She and “Black Phyllis” were allowed to live, without segregation (that came later), among the other women in a dormitory style room equipped with 27 cots but only 16 sets of sheets, as the “Visitors,” or group of men selected to tour the facilities, later reported.

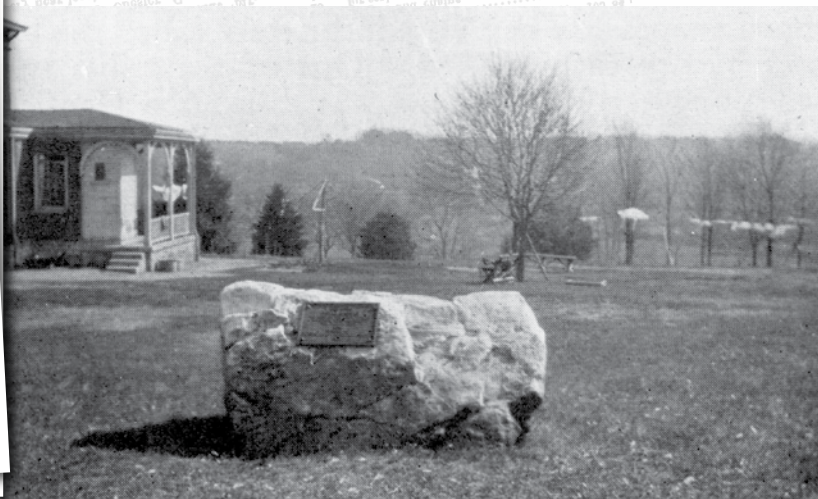
When Freeman entered the Poorhouse at the age of 69, on November 12, 1800, she was celebrated as a native Lenape Indian who lived alone with her two dogs in a series of “rude” huts. She had been under the care of a group of Quaker farmers who signed a formal agreement for her financial support. She was later immortalized in a 1909 poem titled “The Last of Her Race,” but in her lifetime she became what might be called Chester County’s “celebrity” poor. Yet only one other entry is found on the books and that is her death in 1802, the first in the institution, and her burial in the “almshouse graveyard.”



“Old Black Phil,” known as “the Goliath of wood-sawyers,” also disappears from the records, as does “Old Dabbo Ganges,” who entered the poorhouse after escaping a fire in a barn and becoming “deranged” for sleeping out in the open. He had elaborate facial tattoos and was rumored to be a former “African King.”

A woman described as “hearty” Ann Miles, was featured in the newspaper as the oldest resident of the poorhouse, at age 80, in 1873. She had been a periodic resident since 1815, when she found herself in a typical situation. The entry reads, “she was married to Abram Miles [who] after some five or six years abandoned her.”

Newspapers also published lists of expenditures such as buying hickory wood for the facility’s five stoves and paying a local farmer to remove a tree stump near the road



(a job apparently off-limits to the “inmates.”) To offset the costs of the Poorhouse—in its early years, it cost the county an astonishing \$7-\$8,000 a year to maintain—residents sold homespun cloth, brooms, and smoked meats. The most profitable enterprises were the limestone quarries and kilns, which produced more than 40 thousand bushels of lime each year. Farmers from throughout the region came to buy lime for 13 to 20 cents a bushel, depending on the demand for mortar or fertilizer.

Every able body was required to work, even the children, who were typically “bounded” out as apprentices. One entry in the *Visitors’ Reports* states that Ann Bradley spent the morning cooking in the community kitchen and the afternoon helping three women deliver their babies.

As the years passed, and the reports accumulated, a

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stricter separation of the sexes kept the number of babies in check, and a new hospital ensured that the incoming would not get sick and die from exposure, broken limbs, or infectious diseases.

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By the 1850s, however, the *Visitors’ Reports* indicate that the buildings were deteriorating with leaking roofs and windows pronounced “beyond repair.” All the while, Chester County enjoyed a new courthouse, a new horticultural hall and other public institutions.

By the time picture postcards were being printed with the words “Insane Hospital,” the state had taken over and the era of Stewards and Visitors was over. Still, the community mod-

el of the Chester County Poorhouse had a lasting effect, as one historian told me in an interview for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*: “One of the best revelations for me was seeing that these institutions were not these huge, monstrous, isolating places,” historian Monique Bourque said. “Visitors, local merchants, farmers and members of the community were continually interacting with these communities, fundamentally part of the process of coping with the poor.” □

Maximusam, ut  
id quiam quam  
eatisqu isquiam  
quibus solore  
volorere

