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Buried in the Archives: Telling the Forgotten Stories of Poor Farm Residents in St. Clair County

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Abstract:

For many years, the history of the St. Clair County Poor Farm relied heavily on oral history, with dates and facts that may or may not have been accurate regarding the early years of its existence. The purpose of this research is not to discount oral history, but rather to give a framework of facts that can support the valuable stories passed down through the years. The names and stories of those whose circumstances in life made them temporarily or permanently dependent on social welfare programs have remained largely invisible in the published material on St. Clair County’s history. The people who lived at the Poor Farm, whether for a short while or a lifetime, are an underrepresented population in St. Clair County’s history; often their stories and lives have been forgotten and are undocumented. The accessibility of this particular set of records allows a glimpse into their lives and the circumstances in which they found themselves and creates a broader perspective of the history of the county and the people who lived there in the early years of its development.

Keywords: public library, genealogy, local history, poor farms, poor houses

Representation of the Poor in Local History Collections

The local history and genealogy collection of the St. Clair County Library System is located in the lower level of the Main Library. It consists of historic newspapers, photographs, serials, compiled genealogies of local families, census records, vital records, city/county directories, and monographs. The materials cover the local area as well as the State of Michigan and surrounding areas. The portion of the collection that focuses specifically on St. Clair County holds an immense amount of information on prominent citizens: business owners, politicians, landowners, and civic leaders. Everyday citizens are also represented in city and county directories and in newspaper articles covering life events such as marriages,
births, and deaths, as well as general human-interest stories. In contrast, the names of people who depended on social welfare systems such as the poor farm are almost non-existent in the local history resources, except for newspaper notices of persons being sent to the poor farm, listings in state and federal censuses, or published reports of monetary relief given by the county. The published information that does exist for this segment of the population carries a connotation of shame and pity, with little thought at the time it was recorded to preserving their dignity or privacy.

Oral histories about the St. Clair County Poor Farm relate the beginning of this institution in 1869 in Smiths Creek, St. Clair Township. However, in 2018 the St. Clair County Library System received a collection of donated materials that included a ledger titled *Record of Inmates of St. Clair County Poor-House* (fig. 3) which contains information recorded for the years 1857-1893. The name index in the front of the book lists each resident’s name, and refers to the page number that contains that person’s intake information: township residency, date received, nationality, age, cause of indigency, marital status, and date of leaving or any notes (fig. 1). The first entry in the book revealed that a poor farm existed in this county as early as 1857. This spurred further research which indicated the much earlier date of 1842, a mere 21 years after the county was officially established in 1821. The accessibility of this information has expanded our knowledge and understanding of the early residents of our county. It offers a glimpse into the lives of people who required aid for a variety of reasons, including disease, injury, family abandonment, mental health crises, and addiction.

![Record of Inmates of St. Clair County Poor-House](image-url)
Relief for the Poor in Michigan

Even before it was granted statehood, Michigan, as part of the Northwest Territory and later as its own territory, had enacted legislation to provide for the poor. These laws were modeled after those established in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Ohio, which in turn were based on Elizabethan England’s poor laws. Through the years, the responsibility for the poor shifted between county and township authorities. Eligibility for poor relief, including residence in poor houses and on poor farms was based on a person’s settlement, meaning where they lived, paid taxes, served as apprentices, or owned or rented land. As these laws were amended through the years, each succeeding legislation established greater requirements to establish settlement. If relatives (parents, grandparents, and adult children, but not siblings) of a poor person were identifiable, they were held liable for providing support (Bruce & Eickhoff, 1936). In St. Clair County, the poor relief system was overseen by the County Board of Supervisors, a governmental body made up of representatives from each of the cities and townships in the county and a precursor to the current Board of Commissioners. The Board of Supervisors appointed three Superintendents of the Poor, employed a Keeper of the Poor, and later added a Farm Manager.

A few examples in St. Clair County of the concept of how settlement determined eligibility of receiving aid are shown in newspaper articles referring to a Mr. Graham (fig. 2) and Julia Bourgeon and her children (fig. 3). While Mr. Graham was simply denied admittance, the poormaster did provide transportation for Mrs. Bourgeon and her children to Montreal, Ontario (Canada) where they had family who could help them. In both instances, the parties were not considered settled in St. Clair County and were not eligible for relief. It is likely that Mr. Graham had to return to Sanilac County for assistance.

Figure 2. PHDT Jan 2, 1903

Figure 3 PHDT Nov 19, 1891
Other state-run institutions were established for people who needed assistance due to vision and hearing disabilities or mental health challenges. The state was responsible for those deemed “insane” and often sent them to asylums; Michigan’s earliest was in Kalamazoo and opened in 1859, while the Eastern Michigan Asylum in Pontiac opened in 1878 (Durant, 1877). Depending on the severity of their condition, they were allowed at times to stay at poor farms, especially when asylums were overcrowded. People with vision and hearing challenges were sent to the Michigan Institution for the Education of the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind in Flint. Children in poor farms were often apprenticed or adopted out to local families or sent to the State Public School in Coldwater. There were also two schools in Michigan for juvenile offenders. The State Reform School (for boys) was established in Lansing in 1855; the Michigan Reform School (for girls) in Adrian accepted its first inmate in 1881 (Andreas, 1883).

No primary sources were located that would explain the traditional oral history that the poor farm began in 1869, although there are clues that may explain how this assumption was made. In 1874 in the *Port Huron Daily Times* it was reported that one of the Supervisors of the Poor, Uriah Hayden, had kept a detailed record of not only financial statistics and recipients of relief, but also “…all the resolutions, small-talk, red-tape and business proceedings of the Board of Supervisors affecting county-house interests; also income of farm, improvements on same, the record being complete and full in every particular. It is beautifully transcribed, and, might be called, an entirely gratuitous work on the part of Mr. H., nothing of the kind having been kept by the superintendents heretofore”. The State of Michigan also began requiring detailed reports of poor farms from the Superintendents of the Poor in each county in Michigan in 1869. It may be that limited access to any records or reports prior to this date gave rise to the conclusion that this year marked the beginning of the poor farm. The report to the state for 1869 statistics contains brief statistics on the highest number of inmates at one time and the number of children under the age of 16. St. Clair County’s numbers were 34 and 3, respectively (Michigan, 1870).

In the Andreas *History of St. Clair County*, it is noted that in 1842, “H.N. Monson and W.B. Barron were appointed agents to sell the poor farm, previously bought from M.H. Miles, for $1,000,” and that, “In 1846, the old poor farm was traded to Chamberlin (sic) and Ogden for northwest quarter of the northwest quarter Section 9, Town 5, Range 16, and contract to build house and barn on same. The sum of $200 was paid to them in addition to the land” (1883). This information is corroborated by deeds recorded with the county’s Register of Deeds, including the aforementioned record of Marcus H. Miles and his wife Maria selling 60 acres in the Town of China to the County of St. Clair, for $1000 on March 8, 1842. This firmly establishes a much earlier date than 1869 for the existence of the poor farm in St. Clair County.

Given the misconception about the date of the beginning of the St. Clair County Poor Farm, it is understandable why people assumed its purpose was to help U.S. Civil War veterans struggling after their return from the battlefield. However, there were other provisions established on both state and national levels meant to prevent veterans from ending up at poor farms and poor houses. In 1867 the State Military Board was authorized to arrange for a Soldiers’ Home “for the maintenance, care and support of Michigan soldiers, sailors and marines, at the Harper Hospital, in the City of Detroit” (Michigan, 1869). This home was meant for temporary relief. There was also a soldiers’ home in Grand Rapids. For permanent relief, national asylums were set up in Columbus, Ohio, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There were National Homes for permanently disabled volunteer soldiers at Dayton, Ohio;
Milwaukee; and Augusta, Maine (Michigan, 1869). This is not to say that veterans never lived at the St. Clair County Poor Farm, only that it was established well before the U.S. Civil War began.

There are many reasons noted in the ledger for people to be admitted to the poor farm. Much of the terminology has changed and is now considered outdated and inappropriate. Some of the reasons include: fits, insane, deaf & dumb, partially deranged, father sent to jail for stealing, born in poor house, friendless, simple, pregnant and deserted by husband, lame. Many people stayed for a short while until they were well enough to return to a job. Others went to live with family or friends. Some were sent to other institutions as previously noted. Many people became permanent residents until their deaths.

Through the years, the name of the poor farm would change, first renamed The St. Clair County Infirmary after the residence was rebuilt in 1915 following a fire. The name change was meant to reduce the negative connotation associated with the “poor farm” name. The infirmary ran for several years until it was converted into a medical facility. It was renamed the St. Clair County Medical Centre and dedicated in 1962. It operated in this manner for the next 30 years until the decision was made to close it. Despite attempts to have historical designation attached to the facility, the building was unceremoniously demolished in 1993, with only a small article published in the paper to report the event (fig. 4). What remains today are the barns, now as an established museum that is a testament to the agricultural portion of the poor farm (fig.5). Also remaining is the cemetery, full of the mostly unmarked graves of those who lived their final days as wards of the county (fig. 6). The land on which the final poor farm stood is now the Goodells County Park.

Figure 4. P, 11 Jun 1993 p.1
Case Study: Jane Cook Folkert

Jane Cook was born in Ireland in 1832. She immigrated to the United States sometime between 1839-1850. Her parents were George Cook and Susan Stinson. She had two brothers, John and William, and two sisters, Catherine and Rachel. On May 16, 1855, she married John Garrett Folkert (“Garrett”), a laborer from Holland. According to the U.S. Federal Census for 1860, they lived in Clay Township, St. Clair County, with their two sons, John G. and Frederick. Jane later gave birth to another daughter, Carrie, around 1861. With the U.S. Civil War raging, Garrett enlisted in Company K, 5th Michigan Infantry on September 1, 1862 and was mustered out thirteen days later. Perhaps he and Jane did not even realize yet that they had another child on the way. Their daughter Martha was born the following May.

The 5th Infantry fought at the Battles of Fredericksburg, Cedars, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. On July 2, 1863, during the Battle of Gettysburg, 105 men—about half of the Regiment—were killed or wounded, including Garrett Folkert, who had his right leg amputated at the thigh. He died from his wounds three months later on September 5, 1863, at
Letterman Hospital. He was buried in the National Cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (AllMichigan, 2015).

On February 3, 1867, less than four years after her husband died, Jane, then age 33, entered the St. Clair County Poor Farm, listed in the record book as a “soldier’s widow and insane.” She remained there for one year, leaving in February 1868, only to return at the end of that year on December 30. In the 1870 U.S. Federal Census, she is listed among the inmates of the Poor Farm, which at that time was located on Frith Road in Section 9 of St. Clair Township. Two of her children, Frederick and Martha, ages 11 and 7, respectively, were living in the home of James and Ann Brown in Clay Township. Jane’s other two children were not found in the 1870 census, but there are death records for both of them in the years following. Her daughter Carrie Folkert died in Algonac on March 3, 1873 at the age of 12. Her cause of death is listed as “unknown.” In 1875, Jane’s son John G. died in Alpena at the age of 18.

Martha Folkert was adopted by James and Ann Brown and later married George Gillert in Algonac, Michigan, on June 12, 1882. Frederick lived for a time with his aunt, Jane’s sister Catherine, who had married Andrew Rattery and lived in Clay Township. Frederick is included in their household in the 1880 Census. He would later be deemed incompetent and insane, with his sister Martha requesting their cousin John Rattery to be appointed Guardian to oversee the pension Frederick was to receive as an incompetent child of a deceased soldier.

Jane Folkert remained at the Poor Farm from 1868 until November 3, 1887, when she was sent to the Eastern Michigan Asylum in Pontiac. She spent the rest of her life there. A newspaper article titled “Insane People” and published in the Port Huron Daily Times on October 12, 1900, lists the names of 77 people from St. Clair County who were patients at the asylum; Jane’s name is included. The Daily Herald published an article about one year later declaring that the probate judge had ordered Jane’s guardian to pay the county treasurer $874.56 for Jane’s maintenance at the asylum. As Garrett’s widow she received a pension from the government; these funds were managed by her guardian. She died January 19, 1908 at 75 years old, from facial erysipelas (a bacterial infection also known as “St. Anthony’s fire”) and hypostatic congestion. She had lived for 40 years institutionalized with a diagnosis of insanity in time of limited knowledge and treatment of mental health challenges.

**Conclusion**

Jane Folkert’s story is just one of many buried in the archives, the stories of people who have been forgotten and are virtually invisible in the county history books. The existence and accessibility of the Record of Inmates of St. Clair County Poor House offers us the opportunity to remember these people and discover their stories. This is part of the history of St. Clair County, and their stories create a broader, more diverse representation of the social and economic standing of the people who lived here.

In 2019, the St. Clair County Library System was awarded a grant through the Save Michigan History program from the Michigan State Historical Records Advisory Board, through funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHRPC), National Archives and Records Administration. This grant provided matching funds to purchase the equipment necessary to digitize the poor farm ledger and make it accessible to more people. The project was completed in 2020; the digitized file is accessible on the library’s website. ([https://www.stclaircountylibrary.org/services/list/local_history](https://www.stclaircountylibrary.org/services/list/local_history))
Acknowledgments

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