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# The Montgomery County Poor Farm & Almshouse: Its History and People

*Part 1: Origins Through the Nineteenth Century*

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By Julianne Mangin

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# The Montgomery County Poor Farm & Almshouse: Its History and People

## *Part 1: Origins Through the Nineteenth Century*

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By Julianne Mangin

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Throughout the 159 years of its existence, the Almshouse<sup>1</sup> at the Montgomery County Poor Farm<sup>2</sup> was home to poor, sick, and elderly citizens of the county who had nowhere else to go. It was a dilapidated firetrap of a building where dozens of residents lived, with only an overseer and his wife to care for them. Though the names and stories of most of the residents are unknown, some have emerged through research. Eliza Mobley was sent there because she was mentally ill and had no family to look after her. Michael Keefe was a well-educated man who, in his eighties, had outlived whatever meager savings he'd accumulated as a teacher. Watt Hodge, who was crippled and illiterate, spent fifty years living in the dark and dingy basement of the Almshouse because he was African American.

From 1789 through 1948, the Montgomery County Poor Farm and Almshouse were part of the county's program to assist the poor. It was the last resort for people with no money, no home, and no family or social network to support them. Poor people ended up there for various reasons, such as being too old or sick to care for themselves, suffering mental illness or intellectual disability, or enduring physical disability, blindness, or deafness. The Almshouse was also intended to be a place of work for able-bodied poor people who were sent there by the county court or who went there on their own.

The residents of the Almshouse were referred to as "inmates," regardless of their reason for being there. This practice, not limited to Montgomery County, reflected a perception that poverty was the result of a moral deficiency. Living in the almshouse meant being hidden from the view of the community, and conditions were stark—as if the people sent there were being punished for having ended up destitute. Over many years, this inadequate system contributed to the neglect and abuse of the county's most vulnerable citizens.

## **ORIGINS OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S POOR FARM AND ALMSHOUSE**

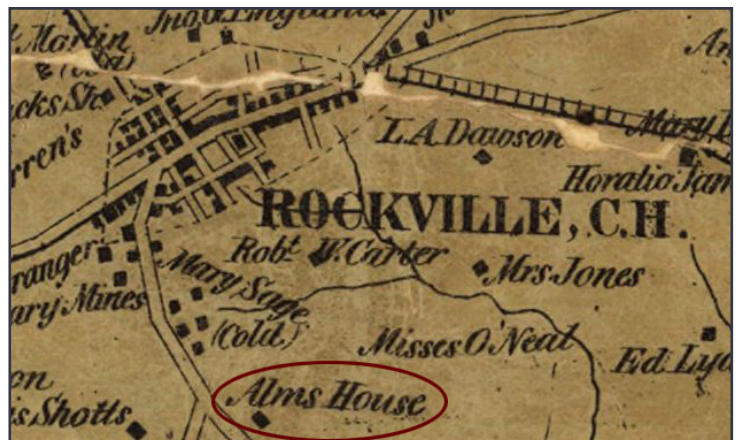
When Maryland was still an English colony, relief for the poor came in two forms. If the person was poor but able to live in their own home, they would receive direct cash payments from the government and might also be absolved from paying taxes. This was called "outdoor relief." Those who were poor and had no home or were mentally or physically unable to take care of themselves would be placed in private homes, and the homeowner would receive payments from the county in return for their care. This was called "indoor relief."

Over time, it became harder to find willing citizens to take the poor into their homes. As a result, in 1768, the Maryland General Assembly passed a law that provided for almshouses to be built in five counties: Frederick, Anne Arundel, Prince George's, Worcester, and Charles counties.<sup>3</sup> At that time, what we now know as Montgomery County was still part of Frederick County. In 1776, when Montgomery County was created from the southern portion of Frederick County, it became responsible for its own poor. At first, outdoor relief was the only method for dealing with the poor since the county didn't yet have its own almshouse.

In 1787, the Maryland General Assembly passed a law directing Montgomery and Harford counties to erect almshouses.<sup>4</sup> The law, which had twenty-three sections, addressed how the Poor Farm would be established, who would run it, how they would be appointed, what taxes would be levied to finance it, and how the property would be equipped and furnished. It also addressed who would be admitted to the Almshouse, how they were expected to behave, and how the rules would be enforced.

Seven men were named to be the initial Trustees of the Poor in Montgomery County: Richard Wootton, William Oneale, Benjamin Mackall, Charles Perry, Charles Beatty, Henry Brookes, and Jeremiah Crabb. If any of them refused to serve, they were to be fined ten pounds. After the initial Trustees were named in 1787, there is no information on who served as trustees until 1858, when the County Commissioners appointed Henry Harding, Samuel Jones, William Thompson, Josiah W. Jones, B. E. Hughes, Francis Valdenar, and Joseph A. Taney.<sup>5</sup> In later years, County Commissioners annually appointed trustees, one each from the five election districts. It appears that trustees were often reappointed from year to year, unless they declined to serve, moved out of the county, or died. Henry A. Pumphrey was listed as a trustee from 1866-1897. G. Fenton Snouffer and Charles J. Maddox both served from 1893-1904, and Cloe E. Meem from 1893-1907. There seems to have been a fair amount of entrenchment in these positions and little turnover from year to year.

At first, the Trustees were responsible not only for the Almshouse, but for administering aid to all the poor of the county. An 1860 State law entitled a trustee to "...three dollars a day for each day he shall attend to the duties of his office, and five cents for every mile he shall necessarily travel from his place of residence to their place of meeting, but no mileage in returning."<sup>6</sup> Sometime before 1880, the County Commissioners assumed responsibility for out-pensioners, leaving only the Poor Farm and Almshouse under the purview of the Trustees of the Poor,<sup>7</sup> who were usually chosen from among political supporters of the commissioners.<sup>8</sup> This system of paid political patronage made it in the interest of appointed trustees to report that everything was fine at the Almshouse and that both it and the farm were run in the most economical manner. This is likely to have resulted in the least possible amount of resources spent on the comfort and care of the residents of the Almshouse.



Map detail of Rockville, including "Alms House" from Martenet and Bond's Map of Montgomery County, Maryland. Baltimore: Simon J. Martenet, 1865.

After being appointed in 1787, Montgomery County's first Trustees of the Poor were authorized to purchase land of no more than fifty acres as close as possible to the county courthouse. On this land, they were to erect an almshouse to provide shelter for the poor and disabled and to serve as a workhouse for able-bodied poor. The trustees were also authorized to buy "sufficient beds, bedding, working tools, kitchen utensils, cows, horses, and other necessaries," and to appoint an overseer.

The original fifty acres comprising the Poor Farm, purchased by the Trustees in 1789, were located approximately a mile southwest of the county courthouse.<sup>9</sup> It is presumed that soon after the property was acquired, the Almshouse was built. Subsequent land acquisitions by the Trustees occurred in 1825, 1876, 1882, and 1903, expanding the Poor Farm to about 148 acres.<sup>10</sup> In 1907, seventeen acres were sold by the Trustees, making the total area of the property 131 acres.<sup>11</sup> The land where the Poor Farm used to be is now divided by I-270. The Montgomery County Detention Center, which is west of I-270 and north of Wootton Parkway, was built on the foundation of the Almshouse.

In addition to a dwelling house and farmable land, there was a cemetery. Most burials there would have consisted of unclaimed or unidentified remains of people who died in the county. Residents who died at the Almshouse were likely interred in the cemetery as well, though some had family or friends who claimed them and buried them elsewhere.

In 1870, the Mutual Fire Insurance Company issued a policy to “The Trustees of the Alms House” covering a dwelling house, barn and stable, corn house, meat house, and a hen house. The premium was \$341 and the coverage for the structures named in the policy was \$2,842.00. The Almshouse was said to be of brick construction covered with shingles. It was further described as follows: “There are four chimneys, two at each gable uniting at the top. The house is built on a hill side, and is two stories high in front and two stories and a basement at the rear. Open fire places are used except in the two kitchens where are [sic] cooking stoves.” In 1878, the Trustees of the Poor requested additional insurance because they planned to renovate the existing Almshouse and build an addition to it.<sup>12</sup>

The Almshouse in that insurance policy is the same one that stood on the Poor Farm until it was demolished in 1959. In 1908, a photograph of the Almshouse was published in the annual report of the Maryland Lunacy Commission.<sup>13</sup> It shows the gable on the south side of the house with its two chimneys joining at the top, just as described in the insurance policy. Behind the house is a faint image of the 1878 addition, which was perpendicular to the original building. A 1912 photograph taken by Lewis Reed<sup>14</sup> shows the front of the Almshouse, which faced west. Two large chimneys can be seen on either side of the original portion of the house, again echoing the description in the policy. The 1878 addition is on the left, its gables facing the front and back of the Almshouse. An aerial photo taken in 1957 shows this same house on the site two years before it was torn down.<sup>15</sup>

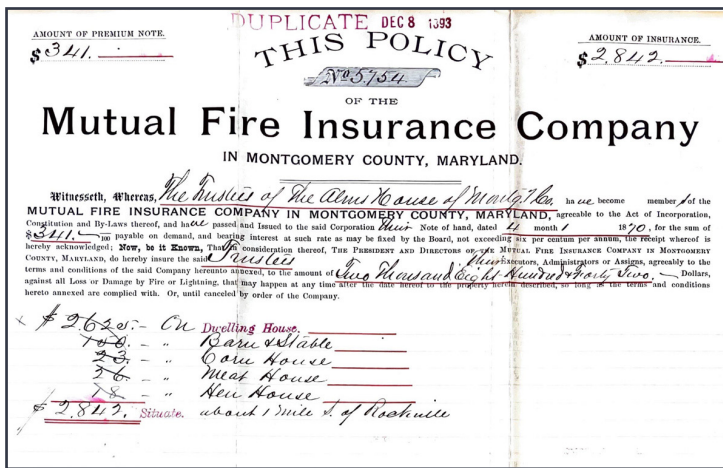
The Mutual Fire Insurance Company policy didn’t give information on the age of the Almshouse. However, it appears likely that the original Almshouse built circa 1789 is the same one described in the policy. In 1907, overseer J. William Rabbitt stated, “This house is more than two hundred years old and shows the ravages of time.”<sup>16</sup> A 1940 report on almshouses in Maryland suggested that the county’s almshouse was “said to be nearly 200 years old.”<sup>17</sup> These two statements about the age of the Almshouse are likely inaccurate because for them to be true it would have to have been built well before 1787, when the law ordering Montgomery County to build an almshouse was passed. However, they make a convincing case that the structure built to house the poor around 1789 was in continuous use until 1948, when it was closed.



Graphic provided by Brian Crane (Archaeologist, Historic Preservation Office, Montgomery Planning). Edited by the author to include 1903 tract.



Montgomery County Almshouse (Maryland Lunacy Commission, Twenty-Fifth Report of the Lunacy Commission to His Excellency the Governor of Maryland, December 1, 1910. Baltimore: Lucas Brothers, Inc., 1910, p. 92).



Detail of first page, Mutual Fire Insurance Company policy for Poor Farm and Almshouse. Originally issued May 16, 1870. (*Montgomery History*)

A Grand Jury for the Montgomery County Court, appointed for six-month terms beginning in March and November of every year, primarily engaged in referring criminal cases to the court, but was also instructed to inspect the Jail and the Almshouse “... with special regard to the sufficiency of their supplies for food, clothing, and bedding of their inmates during the rigors of winter, and the preservation of health and cleanliness.”<sup>18</sup> At the end of each Grand Jury term, a report was submitted to the Judge of the Circuit. Starting in 1872, these reports were published in the *Sentinel*.

The Trustees of the Poor were to meet four times a year and at other times as necessary. The November meeting each year included an election of the overseer, physician, and clerk of the Almshouse. The overseer was chosen based on his reputation as a farmer as well as his political connections. He lived in the Almshouse with his family, and in addition to being responsible for the residents, he also managed the farm. The overseer kept an account of all the equipment given to him to run the farm, expenses of caring for the poor, and income from the sale of produce grown on the farm. The law also required that the overseer keep a list of all the people living at the Almshouse, noting whether they were simply poor or if they were vagrants or other types of offenders who had been committed there by county judges.

Throughout the history of the Almshouse, none of the overseers or their wives had any training in social work or health care, even though the day-to-day care of those who were committed there was often performed by the overseer’s wife. All able-bodied people committed to the Almshouse were expected to work in return for the maintenance and support provided to them. Another requirement of the law was that residents had to wear a badge made of blue or red cloth with the letters “P. M.” (which stood for “Poor Montgomery”). If they refused, they could be punished by the withholding of benefits, being put to hard labor, or whipped. It was this harshness toward the poor that made the Almshouse a place to avoid unless there were no other options. Physicians appointed to care for the Almshouse residents didn’t live on-site, although they usually lived in nearby Rockville. They maintained their individual practices and only came to the Almshouse to treat patients on an as-needed basis.

## Overseers of the Poor Farm

*This list of overseers was reconstructed from newspaper reports and census records. No overseers could be determined prior to 1840 and the earliest mentioned had no specific dates associated with their terms—possibly other served during those decades as well.*

James A. Shaw, ca. 1840s.	Philip J. Case, 1909-1918
Zadoc Case, ca. 1850s	William H. Case, 1918-1920
William Cephias Hardy, 1860-?	Grover D. Linthicum, 1921-1923
Isaac O. Rabbitt, ca. 1864-1875	Thomas D. Harris, 1924-1924
John P. Connell, ca. 1876-1881	Dorsey W. Nicholson, 1924-1939
John T. Best, ca. 1882-1887	Harris S. Butt, 1940-1941
Leonidas Ricketts, ca. 1891-1904	Isaac Suddueth, 1942
James William Rabbitt, 1905 -1908	Charles L. Whirley, 1942-1948

## Physicians Serving the Poor Farm

*These are the physicians and their years of service whose connection to the Almshouse was verifiable in the available sources. Others may have served.*

A. H. Sommers, 1872-1876
Edward Elisha Stonestreet, 1880-1885
Edward Anderson, 1886-1917
Claiborne H. Mannar, 1917
George E. Lewis, 1918-1938
Gilbert W. Hartley, 1939-1948

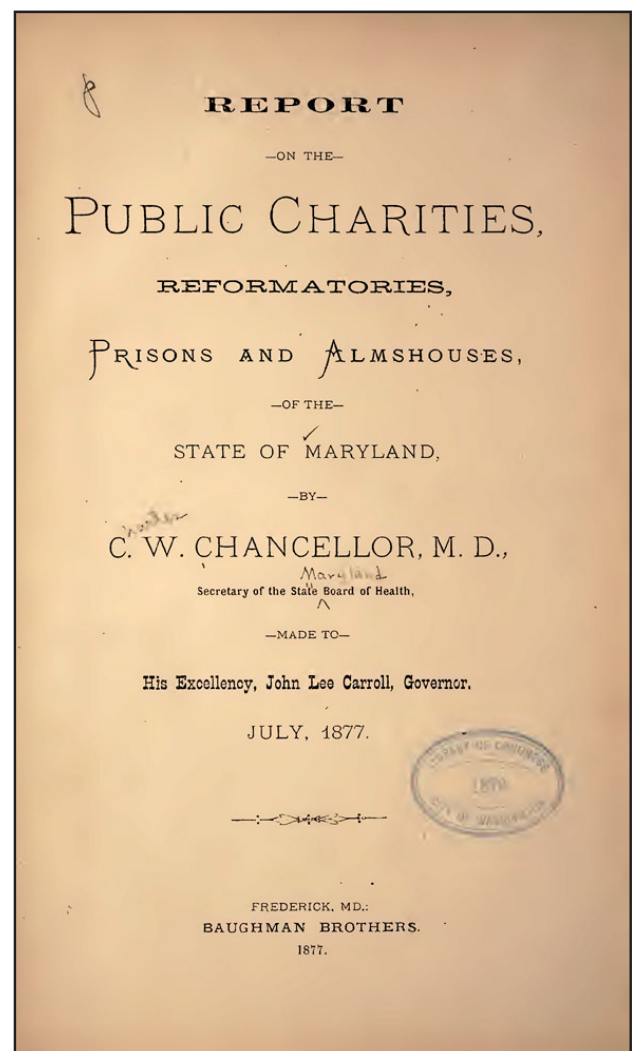
The population of the Almshouse ranged from twelve to eighteen residents between 1840 and 1870, according to the available data. It had nearly doubled by 1877, when twenty-eight individuals were in residence. The County Commissioners and the Trustees of the Poor, concerned about overcrowding and urged on by the Grand Jury, had already begun thinking about replacing or renovating the Almshouse. Around the same time, the State of Maryland had become concerned about conditions at public-run institutions such as almshouses. On February 14, 1877, the Governor of Maryland, John Lee Carroll, instructed Dr. C. W. Chancellor, Secretary of the State Board of Health, to visit and inspect public charities, reformatories, prisons, almshouses, and public hospitals throughout the state. In particular, he was to report on the number of “pauper insane” who were confined in institutions that were not hospitals. Dr. Chancellor and his committee visited the Montgomery County Almshouse and Jail on March 24. In the *Sentinel*, it was reported that they “... made their examination, finding the inmates and prisoners well cared for, but suggested repairs in the buildings.”<sup>19</sup>

Chancellor’s visit to Montgomery County may have spurred the county officials to renovate the Almshouse. The April 1877 Grand Jury report included a recommendation that an additional building be erected next to the Almshouse, and other improvements made to the existing building.

*...the main building is badly arranged for the comfort and health of the inmates. The white inmates are nine in number and appeared clean and comfortable, the colored are sixteen in number and were neither clean nor comfortable, owing to the rooms they occupy in the basement being without sufficient ventilation or light. Therefore, we recommend to the County Commissioners to erect a new frame building at the west end of the main building for the use and occupation of the overseer and his family, and to make such other improvements to the buildings as may be necessary for the comfort of the inmates.*<sup>20</sup>

When Dr. Chancellor’s full report came out in July, a more dismal picture of Montgomery County’s Almshouse emerged, especially concerning the treatment of the Black residents:

*The first floor is occupied by the Superintendent’s family, and the second by white inmates, male and female. The rooms of this floor are large, clean and comfortable, and are heated by open fire-places; the bedding was ample and clean, and the inmates well cared for. The basement is used for colored inmates; it is divided into small rooms which were overcrowded, dirty and offensive; in many of them men and women were domiciled together, some of whom were confined to bed from sickness, and others insane and paralyzed.*<sup>21</sup>



Title page of C. W. Chancellor’s report, 1877.

On May 25, 1877, an advertisement placed by the Trustees of the Poor appeared in the *Sentinel* soliciting bids “for the erection and completion of the additional buildings at the Alms House.” The bidding was to close on June 6. There were several bids, ranging from \$1,300 to \$2,000. The Trustees accepted the proposal of J. B. Edmonstone, who bid \$1,987: the second highest received. An editorial in the *Sentinel* reported that the County Commissioners had rejected the Trustees’ request for the funds, and suggested that an investigation be made into how and why the proposal was selected. It is not known which contractor eventually did the work. The budget for 1878 contained a line item for an addition to the Almshouse (rather than additional buildings, as proposed in the bid solicitation), which ended up costing the county \$3,952.00. This amount was nearly twice the annual appropriation for the Almshouse, which at the time was \$2,200.00. The county’s total expenditures during that budget year were \$87,159.64.<sup>22</sup>

While there was community support for improving the Almshouse at this time, there was also criticism regarding how it was run and paid for by the county. An 1878 article in the *Sentinel* suggested that paying the Trustees of the Poor was wrong and that the County Commissioners should find people willing to do it for free. Alternatively, it was suggested that the County’s Commissioners should attend to the Almshouse themselves, without additional expense to the county.<sup>23</sup> A follow-up article a week later mentions that one of the Trustees, who was not named, agreed that he and his counterparts should not be paid and that he would be willing to serve for free. He also informed the *Sentinel* that when meetings of the Trustees of the Poor were held at the Almshouse, “lavish and sumptuous dinners” were served. “We rightly presume that the Alms House was created for the maintenance of the poor, but we do not find any legal provision for furnishing all the delicacies of the seasons and the richest fluids of the distillery to the Trustees of the Poor and their invited and uninvited guests. We do find a law which peremptorily forbids, with a fine attached, any one to sell liquors to the inmates of the Alms House. Yet it is carried there and publicly exposed upon the dinner-table and charged to the county.”<sup>24</sup>

When the addition to the Almshouse and renovations to the existing building were completed in 1878, the resident population was twenty-eight. It didn’t take long, however, for the Almshouse to become overcrowded again. The following year the population jumped to forty-three.

## PEOPLE OF THE ALMSHOUSE

Many people lived and died at the Almshouse without leaving much record of their existence other than a name in a census record or a notice of death. But the occasional stories that can be uncovered about certain residents throughout the second half of the nineteenth century demonstrate how easily a healthy, self-supporting person might lose everything—money, employment, family—through accident, disease, medical or psychiatric crisis, or economic upheaval. Before the creation of social safety nets such as Social Security or Medicare, a person with no resources to fall back on might end up at the Almshouse.

However bad conditions were, they were far worse for any people of color confined there. As in all other aspects of life in Montgomery County, segregation was enforced at the Almshouse, and Black residents were only allowed to live in the basement. One only needs to read Chancellor’s 1877 report to understand how badly they were treated.

*The sanitary condition of these basement rooms was very bad, and no regard is paid to the morality of the occupants, who live and sleep together regardless of sex. One of the colored men said that when any of their number died, the body laid in bed in the same room with the living until buried. An idiotic girl called Ann had had two children born and begotten at the house.<sup>25</sup>*

## After the Civil War

After the end of slavery, Dr. Washington Duvall of Colesville continued to take care of two of the people he had previously enslaved because one was elderly and the other had a spinal disability. In 1866, he tried to have them placed in the Almshouse, but was told that it was full.<sup>26</sup> Formerly enslaved African Americans emancipated by Maryland's new constitution who were unable to work or were physically or mentally debilitated became the responsibility of the Trustees of the Poor in the mid-1860s. It appears that this unaddressed social issue may have contributed to overcrowding at the Almshouse during this time.



Painting ca. 1840 of "Fairview," home of Dr. Washington Duvall (*Montgomery History*).

Isaac and Lethe Magruder were a married couple who lived at the Almshouse during the 1880 census. Both were about 90 years old at the time. During the 1870 census, they had lived independently in the Rockville District, where Isaac was a farm laborer and Lethe kept house. Because they weren't enumerated in the 1850 or 1860 censuses, it is presumed that they had been enslaved. They didn't appear in the Montgomery County Slave Statistics report of 1867 and 1868, but their daughter Louise Magruder Warren was listed as having been enslaved by Oratio Claggett.<sup>27</sup> After emancipation, Louise married Nelson Cooper, a veteran of the U.S. Colored Troops<sup>28</sup> who was one of the original trustees in 1873 of Union Wesley Methodist Church on Piney Meeting House Road.<sup>29</sup> Isaac and Lethe died sometime after the 1880 census, probably at the Almshouse, and were likely buried in the Poor Farm cemetery.

Thomas Taylor, formerly enslaved by Charles Beckwith (who was the father-in-law of *Montgomery County Sentinel* founder Matthew Fields), was known as "Old Uncle Tom." After emancipation, he lived in the Rockville District with his wife, Juliet, and worked as a farm laborer. Sometime after the 1880 census, he was admitted to the Almshouse, where he died at the age of 103 years on February 18, 1890. He was buried in Saint Mary's Catholic Church cemetery on Old Baltimore Road.<sup>30</sup>

## A Tale of Two Teachers

Nineteenth-century teachers weren't well-paid and often weren't able to save for their old age. Once they were too old to work, they might have had to rely on family or friends to take care of them. Michael Keefe and Brooke Stabler were two teachers who lived at the Almshouse. One had family to turn to for help; the other did not. In both cases, it was sad to see people who had nurtured the intellectual growth of the county end up destitute.

Michael Keefe was born in Ireland in 1813 and immigrated to the United States in 1837. He worked as a schoolteacher in Montgomery County as early as 1860 and into the 1870s, spending many years teaching at the public school in Laytonsville.<sup>31</sup> In his obituary, he was described as "a good citizen and a man of rare intelligence." He never married, had no children, and no family nearby. In 1900, he was eighty-six years old and living at the Almshouse. In April 1907, he fell down a stairway, dislocated his shoulder, and died of shock. Michael Keefe attended St. Mary's Catholic Church in Rockville, not far from the Almshouse, where he was buried.<sup>32</sup>

Brooke Stabler was born in Sandy Spring in 1814 to a prominent Quaker family. His uncle was Edward Stabler, an engraver and president of the Mutual Fire Insurance Company. Brooke Stabler was a teacher during his working life. After 1860, he appears to have become ill and ended up in the Almshouse around the time of the 1870 census. Unlike Michael Keefe, however, Stabler’s family members removed him from the Almshouse. According to the 1880 census, he lived with his cousin Charles Brooke. During his stay there, he worked as a tutor although he was still disabled. He later moved to New Market in Frederick County, to live with his sister, Deborah Stabler Russell.<sup>33</sup> In May 1893, the *Evening Star*, presuming correctly that Stabler was near death, said that “despite invalidism, he was a man of intellect and quick wit, with a talent for versification which he often used to amuse his friends.”<sup>34</sup> Brooke Stabler died at his sister’s home in 1893 and was buried in the Quaker cemetery in Monrovia.<sup>35</sup>

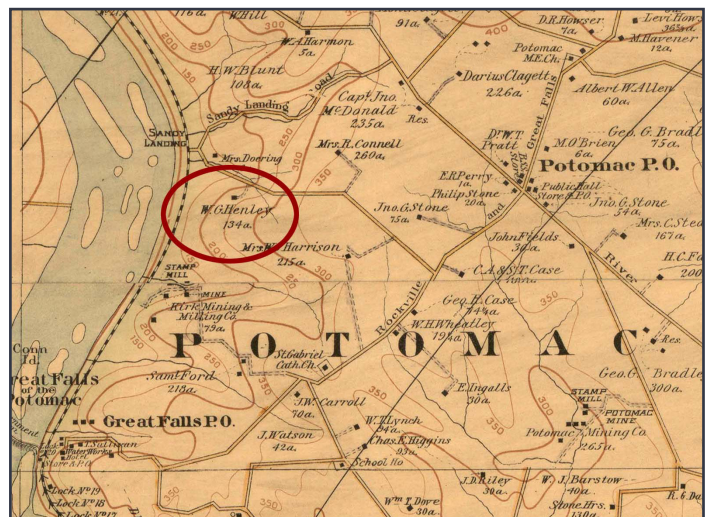
## The “Eccentric”

Kitty Austin lived her last few months at the Almshouse. However, for most of her life, she was fiercely independent and never married. In 1868, she bought an acre of land in Clarksburg,<sup>36</sup> where she lived alone in a secluded log cabin. Several times a year, she’d set out on foot for Rockville, allowing three days for the journey. On the first day, she’d walk the thirteen miles from her home; on the second, she would rest and take care of her business in Rockville; and on the third day, she’d walk the thirteen miles back home again.<sup>37</sup> This was her habit even into her eighties. In 1886, she even planned to walk all the way to the White House to pay her respects to President Cleveland.<sup>38</sup> In 1890, when her health began to fail, she was sent to the Almshouse. Her obituary read, “Although very eccentric she had many warm friends.”<sup>39</sup> She was buried in Monocacy Cemetery in Beallsville.

## The Intemperate

William George Henley might have been a prosperous man, but lost everything due to his addiction to alcohol. In 1874, he bought a 134-acre farm on the banks of the Potomac. In 1878, he married a widow named Martha, who had two children. William and Martha Henley then had five children of their own. In 1893, Martha left her husband and children and moved to Washington, D.C. She filed for a divorce and for a peace bond against him because he had threatened her life.

In June of 1893, William was called before a court in D.C. because he had followed Martha to Washington, hung around the street where she lived, and made threats against her. His lawyer claimed that he had come to the city “to patch up the trouble between his wife and himself and have her go back to the county to take care of her little children.” William admitted in court that the problem between him and his wife was “whisky,” but he swore that he loved the ground she walked on. He said that if she would come home with him, he’d give her his farm and never take another drink as long as he lived. When the prosecutor asked Martha if she thought this would be an opportunity to “heal their wounds and effect a reconciliation,” she replied that she’d rather die on the streets of Washington than return home to him. The judge then lectured William and told him to go back to his farm and take care of his children.<sup>40</sup>



Map detail showing location of Henley property (G.M. Hopkins: “The Vicinity of Washington, D.C.,” 1894).

Less than a year later, in April 1894, William Henley was brought before the Circuit Court in Rockville for beating his wife, who was described as a “mass of bruises” from his abuse.<sup>41</sup> He could have been sentenced to lashes at the whipping post, but instead was given six months in the county jail. He was later sentenced to an additional six months for a separate incident of wife beating.<sup>42</sup> In June 1895, while William was in jail, Martha was granted a divorce. The farm was to be sold, and the proceeds divided between them.<sup>43</sup> A month after the court order, William showed up at Martha’s aunt’s house, where she and her children were living. He barged into the house with a gun, and during a desperate struggle, he shot at Martha twice before the two women were able to force him out of the house. Only one of the bullets hit Martha and fortunately, it glanced off a steel stay in her corset.<sup>44</sup> William was charged with attempted murder but convicted only of assault, and eventually sentenced to merely a year in the Maryland House of Corrections.<sup>45</sup>

Not much is known of his activities after he was released from prison. He quickly remarried and then divorced.<sup>46</sup> It appears that he squandered whatever wealth he had left and continued drinking. His name showed up on a list of pensioners in 1909.<sup>47</sup> Around 1910, he was committed to the Almshouse, where he died in 1911. The cause of death was “old age and intemperance.”

## The Young

Children were often found living in the Almshouse. Some were living there with a parent; others were orphaned with nowhere to live, while a few were likely born there.<sup>48</sup> In the nineteenth century, children from ages three to sixteen could be bound out by the Trustees of the Poor as apprentices to individuals in the community. Advertisements in the *Sentinel* in the 1870s for runaway apprentices warned that anyone who harbored them would be prosecuted. Rewards ranged from one to six cents for their return, although one Richard Burriss, nineteen, was worth a five-dollar reward.<sup>49</sup> Richard was the son of Margaret Burriss, thirty-six, who was enumerated at the Almshouse during the 1870 census, along with her father Charles, sixty-five, and daughter Martha, seven. Also there in 1870 was an unaccompanied child named Ella Greenfield, twelve. Ten years later, in 1880, an unaccompanied child called Nora Greenfield was there, reported as three years old and possibly the daughter of Ella Greenfield from the previous census. Other young residents in 1880 included Malinda Lee, also three years old, accompanied by her mother Christie Lee, thirty-three, as well as Lucy Windear, thirty-six, and her daughters: Mary, four, and Annie, only six months old. Lucy Windear was an African American woman born about 1847 in Maryland. Her descendants settled in Glen, near Potomac where many of them are buried in the Union Wesley Methodist Church cemetery.<sup>50</sup> Lucy Windear, however, was buried in the Poor Farm cemetery when she died in 1934.

In 1886, the Maryland Assembly enacted a law prohibiting children from being committed for longer than ninety days to an almshouse, unless they were physically or mentally disabled.<sup>51</sup> However, children continued to live at the Almshouse well after the passage of the 1886 law.

## The Injured

In addition to housing the poor, the Almshouse functioned as a sort of urgent care facility for its citizens, because the county had no hospital in the nineteenth century. When there was a medical emergency and the injured person was unable to pay for a doctor, they might be taken to the Almshouse. There are scant reports in the *Sentinel* about such incidents, but it’s likely they happened more often than reported.

In 1863, an unnamed Black man was taken to the Almshouse after he was shot by the family of his former enslaver. Having been emancipated in the late Thomas Levi Offutt's will, the man remained on the property even after Offutt's daughter-in-law insisted he should leave. When he refused to go, Offutt's son Thomas Marshall Offutt "appeared with a shot-gun, and pretty well peppered the contumacious colored gentleman, who has since been conveyed to the Almshouse, near this town, where, we are told, he is doing as well as could be expected."<sup>52</sup> The man's ultimate fate is unknown, as there were no follow-up reports.

In 1877, Jacob Smith, of no fixed address, was taken to the Almshouse for treatment after being shot in the head following an alleged robbery. Due to inconsistencies in his story, some believed that he had actually attempted suicide. "He was fed and cleansed of the blood, which gushed from the wound on his clothing, and brought to where he now is. The Doctor gave it as his opinion that the wounds were not fatal."<sup>53</sup>

## The Unemployed

The social and economic upheaval that followed the end of the Civil War caused high levels of unemployment, and a subsequent financial panic in 1873 put thousands more out of work. Many men took to the roads and the railways in search of work. Communities across the United States, including Montgomery County, were faced with what to do about these men, at the time referred to as tramps, vagrants, and vagabonds. Some of them were what we would now call migrant workers. Others, however, sought to support themselves through begging or petty thievery. Whatever the case, starting in the 1870s, many county officials and community leaders became concerned about the rising number of "tramps" roaming about the county and the threat they might pose to the community.



"Tramps in box car playing cards," date unknown (Library of Congress).

In 1877, the Prisoners Aid Society called a state convention regarding the problems caused by vagrancy. Montgomery Blair, representing Montgomery County, spoke to the group, saying, "The courts do not and cannot assume that the tramp is a criminal, but he may develop into a criminal and is the cover for others who are criminals, and he is therefore a very dangerous element in society. The tramp must first of all be given employment, and then the thief who comes in his wake can be suppressed by law."<sup>54</sup>

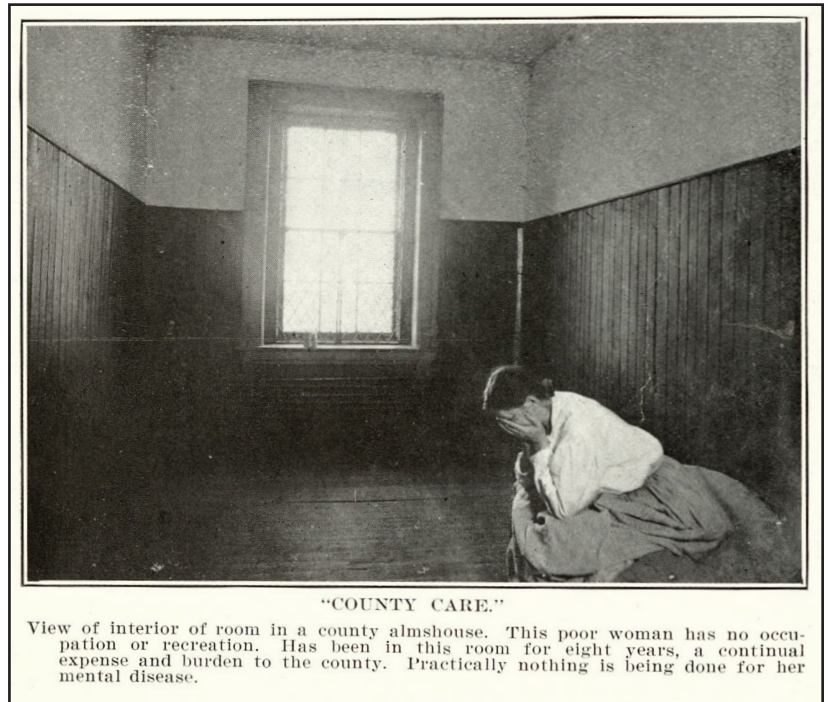
An 1878 article in the *Sentinel* highlighted the problem with "tramps" and how the county dealt with them. "We understand that the magistrates are in the constant habit of formally committing tramps to the Alms House, where they receive board and lodging, and then invigorated at the county's expense, start again upon their pleasant promenade."<sup>55</sup> The law creating the Almshouse implied that it would function as a workhouse, and this idea was confirmed by Judge Richard Johns Bowie in his instructions for the Grand Jury: "The extraordinary number of vagrants roving through the country, and the multiplication of resident idlers and drones among us, render it necessary that the true character of the Alms House should be understood, and its management so conducted as not only to relieve its inmates, but to protect society."<sup>56</sup> However, as the *Sentinel* article pointed out, "There is no labor at the Alms House for them to do, and even if there were, it is not provided with the means that are necessary to make them labor."<sup>57</sup> This may have been a reference to the lack of adequate staff to supervise Almshouse residents of any kind, able-bodied or otherwise. The Annual Report of the Trustees of the Poor for the Year 1879 states that Almshouse provided meals for 327 people designated as "tramps," averaging two meals per person, and costing the county \$130.80.<sup>58</sup>

## The Mentally Ill and the Elderly

Up until the late nineteenth century, the mentally ill in Montgomery County who were poor and had no one to look after them were sent to the Almshouse. Those who were difficult to manage or considered dangerous could be sent to the Montgomery County Jail for tighter control. Given that neither the overseer of the Almshouse nor the warden of the Jail had any experience treating mental illness, the care those people received was merely custodial. Residents of the Almshouse sometimes roamed off property unattended—not because that was allowed, but because there wasn't enough oversight. The trustee-appointed overseer spent his days on the grounds doing farm work, leaving his wife at the house to supervise the residents by herself.

Mentally ill people committed to the Almshouse or the Jail could be referred to a state hospital, at the county's expense, but county officials seemed reluctant to do so. In one report, the Grand Jury suggested (without regard to what kind of care such patients might need) that "...such additions should be made to the Alms House as would accommodate all our Insane Paupers, and thus save to our county the expense of several thousand dollars each year in sending them to Baltimore and Frederick counties."<sup>60</sup> In 1874, when there were eighteen total residents at Montgomery County's Almshouse, the Grand Jury reported that two of them were "in the habit of running at large and annoying the citizens to a considerable extent," and asked that arrangements be made for them to be confined.<sup>61</sup> One of the two, Eliza Mobley, age sixty, was committed by order of the Grand Jury to the Almshouse around 1874. Six years later, she had again escaped, and was found wandering aimlessly near Boyds Station. "She was around here last week and is a perfect nuisance," reported the *Sentinel* in an 1880 article. "She is not fit to be going about; the poor old creature has not long to live, and now the almshouse is her appropriate place, and I would suggest that the trustees of the poor...take her there at once and see that she is kept there."<sup>62</sup> Two months later, her death was reported in the *Sentinel*: "Eliza Mobley, an aged and demented woman, for a number of years an inmate of the Poor House, died at that institution on Saturday last."<sup>63</sup> The other was Truman Walker, born around 1851, who had been in the Almshouse since at least 1870, when he was listed in the census and described as "idiotic." He was about twenty-four years of age when the Grand Jury reported on his wandering ways. In 1875, Walker was finally committed to Montevue Hospital in Frederick, where he died on July 30, 1880.<sup>64</sup>

In 1879, Mary Virginia Coburn, about twenty years of age, was committed to the Almshouse showing signs of mental illness. She was found to be "incorrigible," and was locked up at the jail. After a short period, she was released so that she could return home. Instead, she found her way to Washington, D.C. and was picked up in Georgetown after a few days of wandering the streets. When asked what her business in the city might be, she stated that she was "looking for a man to marry." She was returned to the Almshouse in Rockville; however, she was still difficult to manage and was again taken to the jail.<sup>65</sup> An article in the *Sentinel* pleaded that she be declared insane and sent to a state asylum, because her confinement in jail was worsening her mental state.<sup>66</sup> She appeared in the 1880 census as a patient of the state hospital in Catonsville.



*Maryland Lunacy Commission, Twenty-Fourth Report of the Lunacy Commission to His Excellency the Governor of Maryland, December 1, 1909, Baltimore, Lucas Bros. Inc., 1909, frontispiece.*

In 1886, the State of Maryland took action to intervene in the care of the mentally ill in almshouses throughout the state by creating the Maryland Lunacy Commission.<sup>67</sup> The Commission inspected public or private facilities caring for mentally ill patients, including almshouses, and made recommendations as to whether the patients would be better served in one of the state institutions. The Lunacy Commission published an annual report to the governor on their work. Their interest in the almshouses was mainly concerned with evaluating residents who met the definition of “insane.” However, they also reported on general conditions and made observations, including this one, regarding the Montgomery County Almshouse, from 1899:

*...There is a feeble minded negro woman in this almshouse who has given birth to a number of children while an inmate, and when last seen was nearly ready to add another to her deplorably long list. It would be far more economical for the county to send this woman to one of the State institutions rather than support her and her yearly progeny.*<sup>68</sup>

It is apparent from this report, and the Chancellor report twenty-two years earlier, that county officials—the Commissioners, the Trustees of the Poor, and the overseers—paid little attention to the way women, particularly Black women, were vulnerable to sexual abuse while living in the Almshouse.

The Lunacy Commission held the position that almshouses were inappropriate for those with mental illness, stating, “As a rule...these institutions must be regarded as somewhat of a disgrace to the State. The superintendents are farmers, and have the care of the farm on which the almshouse is situated, and have no special qualifications as custodians of the insane.”<sup>69</sup> Without the authority to remove mentally ill patients from the Almshouse, the Lunacy Commission could only issue recommendations as to which should be placed in a state institution. They wouldn’t receive the authority to intervene further until the twentieth century.

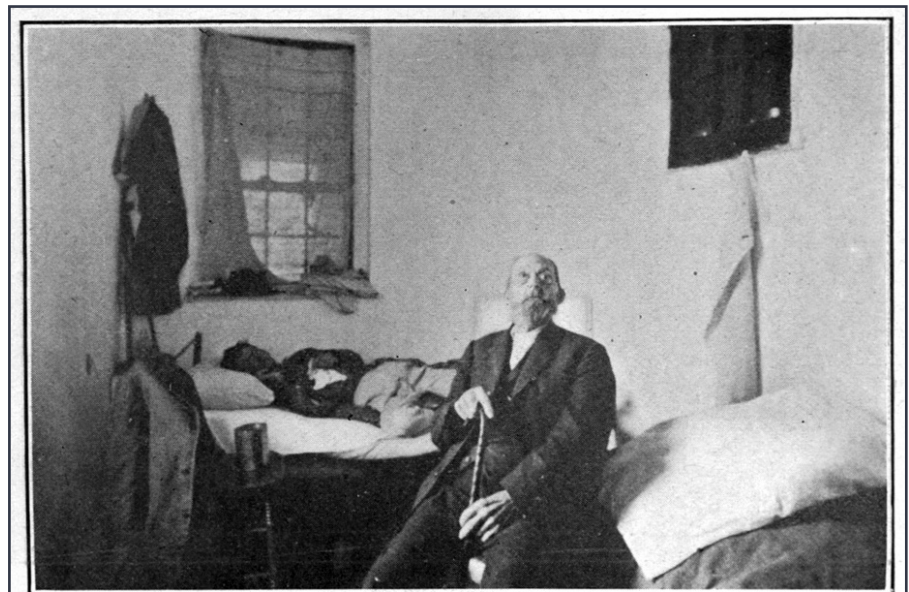


Figure No. 46.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY ALMSHOUSE.

Interior of room showing two consumptives, a menace to every other inmate. Scarcely any precaution taken against the transmission of the germs of tuberculosis.

*Maryland Lunacy Commission, Twenty-Eighth Report of the Lunacy Commission to His Excellency the Governor of Maryland, December 1913, Baltimore, 1913, p. 130.*

Even if residents had no mental disability, they still experienced neglect. The Almshouse was not a safe place to live. It was a fire trap, something that was noted many times over the years. The sick were frequently housed in close proximity to the other residents, spreading disease and possibly death. The Almshouse population peaked at forty-nine in 1882, then gradually decreased to twenty-nine around the turn of the century, still far too many for the overseer or his wife to properly supervise. Residents,

particularly the elderly, often wandered off because they weren't being watched closely enough. In 1875, Emma Johnson leaped from a second-story window of the Almshouse, possibly attempting suicide. Though she broke several bones in one of her feet and had internal injuries, she survived her fall. Five years later, she was listed in the 1880 census, still living at the Almshouse.<sup>70</sup> In 1876, John Gray, an "inmate of the Poor House," was found dead in Laytonsville, apparently having left the Almshouse property on his own. According to the *Sentinel*, "It is thought his death was occasioned by exhaustion from over exertion and decrepitude."<sup>71</sup> Similarly, an elderly woman with dementia wandered off from the Almshouse in 1885 and was later found dead in the woods about a mile away, having perished primarily from exhaustion.<sup>72</sup> In 1897, Samuel Jefferson died after falling from the roof of a porch, fracturing his skull.<sup>73</sup> That same year, Almshouse resident Annie Semmes, described as deaf and "somewhat irrational," was hit by a train while she was walking the tracks.<sup>74</sup> Despite these tragic fatalities, no action was taken over the decades to make the Almshouse safer or to provide more care and supervision for its most vulnerable residents.

## STEPS TOWARD REFORM

Throughout the nineteenth century, the state government became increasingly concerned about what was going on in almshouses throughout Maryland. Starting with Dr. Chancellor's 1877 report on prisons, reformatories, and almshouses, and continuing with the formation of the Maryland Lunacy Commission in 1886, state and local officials were gradually becoming aware of the deficiencies of the almshouse system. However, the State Board of Health and the Lunacy Commission could only make recommendations about improving conditions at almshouses until laws were changed to give them more authority.

Independent reform groups were also interested in the Almshouse, although they too had little power to affect change. The Benevolent Aid Society of Montgomery County, formed in response to Dr. Chancellor's report, stated its objective "shall be to ameliorate the condition of the inmates of the Jail and Alms House of Montgomery County, Maryland, and to organize the efforts of the charitable in such a way as most efficiently to alleviate the suffering of the poor in our midst." Judge Richard Johns Bowie chaired its first meeting and said, "The poor are the victims of vicissitude and disease to which all are liable, they are virtually our brothers and sisters in distress, to whom we owe sympathy and succor." Recognizing that their lack of authority to force the County Commissioners or the Trustees of the Poor to improve conditions, Bowie went on to say that the Society "...does not propose to intrude upon the province of any of the constituted authorities of the county, but to invoke the aid of the moral sentiment of its citizens to enable the proper officers to provide more effectually for the unfortunate persons committed to their charge."<sup>75</sup>

Due to the politics that overshadowed the running of the Almshouse, no lasting changes were made to its operation during the nineteenth century beyond superficial modifications that did little for the overall conditions. The twentieth century would finally bring changes in laws, politics, and society at large that would increase efforts to reform the Almshouse. These changes would also lead to its eventual demise.

**COMING SOON!**

*Part II: The Almshouse in the Twentieth Century*

## A Note on Sources

Although the Trustees of the Poor and the overseer were directed by law to keep records on the management of the Poor Farm and the Almshouse, those records are no longer extant. Therefore, information on what life was like there was gathered through the main sources below.

The *Montgomery County Sentinel* was the newspaper of record for the county; however, it didn't start publishing until 1855, nearly seventy years after the establishment of the Poor Farm in 1787. Starting in 1872, the newspaper published the Grand Jury's reports twice a year, which included what the jurors found when they visited the Almshouse. The *Sentinel* also published the county budget, which showed the expenditures for the Almshouse and the Trustees of the Poor. In addition, it frequently published opinion pieces about the Almshouse, as well as articles on conditions, escapes, and occasional death announcements. Other newspapers such as the *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.) and the *Baltimore Sun* carried stories about the Almshouse as well, but these were usually digests or reprints of what had already appeared in the *Sentinel*.

The U. S. Census of Population data on the residents of the Almshouse can be found from 1840 to 1940 (excepting 1890, the census that was lost). The 1840 census only lists the number of people residing there along with their race, gender, and age. Starting with the 1850 census, people living at the Almshouse were listed by name for the first time. The schedule fields to be filled out by the enumerator were also labeled to indicate if, in addition to being poor, the person was "blind," "dumb," (i.e., could not speak), or "insane." In 1860, the residents are all described as "pauper," except one woman who was described as "pauper and dumb." The 1870 census used the terms "idiotic" or "dumb." In 1880, the fields included terms such as "aged, blind, deaf, dumb, idiotic, insane, maimed, crippled, bedridden, or otherwise disabled." Later censuses did not report on the conditions of the residents nor their reasons for living there.

Death certificates and obituaries provide information on people who lived and died at the Almshouse. The Maryland State Archives has Montgomery County death certificates from 1898 to the present, though from 1898 to 1910, the place of burial was not indicated on the death certificate. We can infer that an individual died at the Almshouse or was buried there based on the place of death, the certificate being signed by the overseer of the Almshouse, or information from an obituary. From 1911 on, death certificates indicated burial at the Poor Farm cemetery in various ways, calling it the Almshouse cemetery, Poor Farm cemetery, Potters Field, County Home cemetery, and County burial ground.

## **About the Author**

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**Julianne Mangin** retired from the Library of Congress in 2011. Since then, she has become an active researcher, writer, and local historian. She gives talks for Montgomery History's Speakers Bureau on the Aspin Hill Pet Cemetery, the Sanctified Sisters of Colesville, Will Adams of Ken-Gar, and the Montgomery County Poor Farm and Almshouse. She is also the author of the memoir, *Secrets of the Asylum: Norwich State Hospital and My Family*.

*The author would like to thank both Katherine Rogers, Collections Manager for Peerless Rockville, and Sarah Hedlund, Director of Library and Archives for Montgomery History for their research assistance.*

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