

Poor Farm: Seeing to town's welfare

By June W. Kennedy

In the early days the Town Farm was an important institution. Also called the Poor House or Almshouse, it sheltered many of the town's needy and benefited others with its services.

The theory in establishing a Poor Farm was that if a man, woman, or even a family with children, because of hard luck, indolence or old age could not maintain themselves, here they would have a home.

If able to work on the farm or in the home, they could do so. It could also be headquarters for outdoor service to those who had a home but due to illness could not obtain fuel, food or clothing for the family. The overseers of the Poor Farm would see that these necessities of life were furnished.

The movement was started in Boston as far back as 1733, but it was not until 1801 that the decision was made to build a Work House for the reception and employment of the idle and poor.

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WANTED!

A MAN AND HIS WIFE,

To take charge of the

ALMS HOUSE IN WESTFORD,

From the first day of April next.

Proposals will be received until the 20th day of March next, by the subscribers.

NATHAN S. HAMBLIN, Overseers
OREN COOLIDGE, of the Poor
SAMUEL FLETCHER, 2d, Westford.

Westford, Feb. 21, 1857.

Journal and Courier Press, Lowell.

THE PREFERRED METHOD of staffing the town poor farm was to advertise for a live-in couple, as in this facsimile of an 1857 handbill. (Courtesy June Kennedy)

Town Poor Farm: Westford once looked after its own

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Westford was also progressive and on April 5, 1824 voted to purchase the John Reid farm for the sum of \$2500. Located on Town Farm Road, the latest 1840 brick building used as the Westford Town Farm now houses the Westford School Administrative Office.

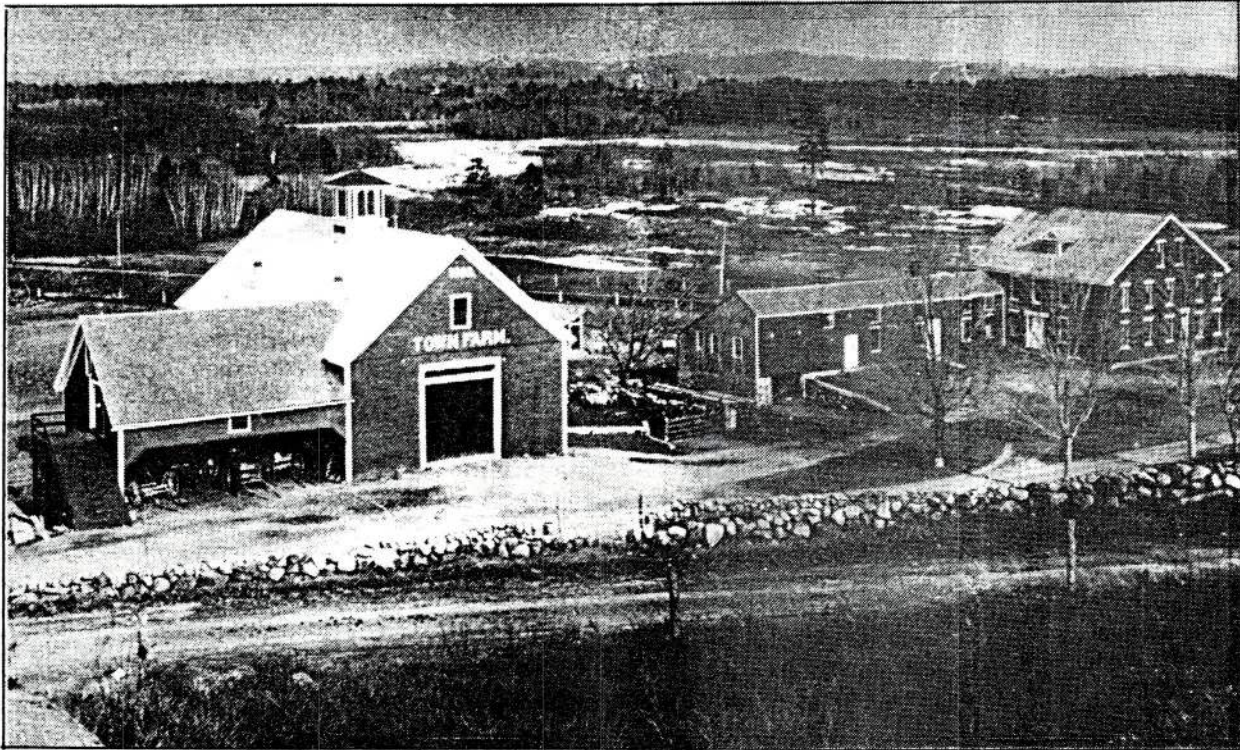
The committee was authorized to receive proposals for a Master and Mistress to take charge of the workhouse. The Master was to be a man of temperance, prudence and good moral character. He was enjoined to reward the faithful and industrious and to punish the idle and disobedient at his discretion by immediate confinement without any food other than bread and water.

The Lord's Day was to be strictly observed and kept. The use of spirituous liquors and any liquor, part of which is spirituous, was strictly forbidden, except when ordered by the physician, overseer or Master.

At no time was there a large number at the Westford Poor Farm, usually 12 to 15. In 1844 the number of residents was larger than usual with 30 people at the Farm and 24 on the outside (meaning those at home) or Westford citizens living in other towns.

Selected portions from the Report of the Overseers of the Poor give an idea of the services rendered as well as a colorful sampling of life at the Farm. Let's take a look at the annual town report for the year ending Feb. 7, 1858:

Receipts, payments
"Received from the income of the farm as by H.W. Crocker's



WESTFORD'S POORHOUSE OPENED its doors in 1824 on what now is Town Farm Road. Under the care of a master and mistress, occupants tended the gardens and helped with chores. Tramps were treated to meals and overnight lodging. This undated photo shows the complex that now serves as headquarters for the Westford school administrative offices.

(Photo from "Westford Recollection" Series, courtesy June Kennedy).

book: For Milk, \$299.07; Calves, \$54.50; Poultry, \$4.50; Vinegar, \$3.35; Beans, \$2.20; Potatoes, \$20.39; Oil Meal, \$8.75; Seed Corn, \$2.20; Work done off the farm, \$23.00; Oak chips, \$5.00; Apples, \$30.40; Cranberries, \$4.50; Rye, \$5.50; Straw, \$12.67; Cider, \$1.43; Lard, \$.75; Wood, \$9.50; Dried

Apple, \$.56.
"For the year ending 1858, the payments made by Henry W. Crocker: ox muzzles and wheelbarrow, \$3.75; medicine, \$7.82; baker's bill, \$5.90; potash, \$4.35; repairing harness, \$1.80; repairing wagon and sleigh, \$2.37; fresh fish, \$1.46; filling saws, \$.80; butchering,

\$1.50; school tax, \$1.36; flour barrels, \$5.60. Also bills paid by the Overseers: James M. Wright for digging grave for Mrs. Stevens, \$2; Ephraim Wright, for 5 Coffins for the Paupers, \$17.75; George M. Child, 53 lbs. butter, \$11.66; S. & S.D. Fletcher, for goods from the Store, \$181.46; and again

\$89.15; George A. Aldrich, for boarding Widow Rhoda Wright, \$17.52; House of Correction, for boarding Levi Prescott, \$4.56; J.B. Fletcher for Manure Fork, \$2; Mrs. A. Davis, for grave clothes for Thomas Kemp, \$1.75; Ira Leland, for cow, \$44; and Dr. B. Osgood, for medical services at Poor House, \$35.79. Number of persons supported wholly or in part in Poor House, 11. The actual expense of supporting the poor exclusive of the interest on the farm has been about \$600 for the past year."

The Westford Town Farm closed its doors to townspeople in 1960. "It's an aspect of our society I'm sorry has left," said Ben Parker. "It had an unfortunate concept of welfare. By today's standards, it was far from it. We sold cows to the Town Farm. It was a pleasant place to visit. Nearly everyone had a project, whether it be tending a garden patch, chickens or pigs. I recall one elderly lady who wouldn't allow anyone else to milk her pet cow. Older people cling to company and pets when their children have left home. There is pride in being somewhat self-sufficient, with minimal expense to the community."

Colorful personalities
"There were characters, too," recalled Alice Collins, who died a few years ago. "Old John Green would visit around. It was interesting to see the old fellow. The Ripleys were hired to take care of them, do the cooking and manage the place. She looked after the old people. They were well taken care of, too."

Ruth Johnson added, "It was a productive farm versus welfare. Downstairs were cells where the drunken people were locked; upstairs I remember Mrs. Ripley cooking mounds of pan-fried potatoes."

In an old published article about the town's past, a man only identified as a "Mr. Goode" related his relationship with a

Poor Farm resident: "Much of interest have I derived from Mr. True Bean whose little life drama ended somewhat pitifully at the Town Farm — a contretemps of which he always had a horror and often swore should never occur."

"The last time I saw my friend, Mr. Bean, he was sitting in a hammock under a maple tree across the road from the Town Farm. He was wholly unreconciled, though he admitted that he was kindly treated. I went away to New York a little later. I received a letter during the winter couched as follows — a highly characteristic message:

"Dear Friend: Have you got an old pipe you are not using and some tobacco?"

Your friend in hell,
True Bean"

"My sympathies were touched. I promptly wrote to Dick Wright at the Wright & Fletcher Store in Westford Center to take Mr. Bean the best plug tobacco. It was done."

"A personal story might be told," said Boston Road resident Allister MacDougall. "Soon after Mr. Bean went to the Poor Farm in 1901, my cousin who had lived next door to this gentleman, and I, both of us about 10, decided to visit him."

One day we drove over, had a good visit, then he pulled his fiddle out from under the bed and entertained us with old-time songs. We enjoyed the visit and I am sure he did, but I still remember how barren his room seemed compared to his cozy cottage on Depot Street. The town paid his funeral expenses of \$27 when he died in 1905."

May the caring and love of this holiday season be extended to Westford's old and needy!

June Kennedy is a Westford resident and a freelance writer whose book "Westford Recollections" includes vignettes and photos depicting the town's past.



Poor old lady

Posing on the doorstep of her modest home on Texas Road before the turn of the century, a barefoot and elderly Catherine O'Toole was destined to spend her last days at the Poor Farm, which today houses the school department central offices on Town Farm Road.

(Photo courtesy of "Westford Recollections")