

THE SHENANDOAH COUNTY FARM/GLEBE/ALMS HOUSE THE POOR HOUSE FARM

Program presented by Karen Cooper, Tuesday, September 12, 2006

I knew I could not talk about the county farm without revealing my own feelings. I must begin by saying that the opinions I will express about the farm are not necessarily those of the historical society, and the research for this speech is not all mine. WPA researchers looked at the farm and the neighboring houses in the 30's. Daniel Burner, Woodstock's former mayor, and Fred Painter, the author of *A Brief History of the Alms House*, were two of the first men to research the history of the county farm. Woodstock Museum Archivist, Linda Varney, examined the farm's records. Lena Fuller, co-author of the recent commemorative program and historical guide for Woodstock's 250th anniversary knows a good deal about the farm and the Maurertown area. The seemingly all-knowing county historian, Harry Long, left me a clear trail of information, and my mother, Rebecca Good, also helped me understand the political and social foundations for the farm's development. Jean Allen Davis, co-author of the history of Edinburg, helped me question some long accepted legends. Jean Martin, the county archivist, maintains a set of files about the farm in the county library.

"Alms house Crumbles"! "Six families evacuated from shelter." "Need for repairs at county farm forces relocation of shelter residents". These were the head lines the beginning of August when deterioration caused the collapse of an exterior brick wall of the old house at the county farm. Since 1799, the former parish glebe has been a refuge for the homeless. But now it sits vacant while county officials weigh the costs of repair against its usefulness and the sentiment attached to the old place.

Glebe, alms house, county farm, poor house – those are not very familiar words. We know some of them from books and movies. Often in movies about old England, we hear the beggars on the street crying out, "Alms for the poor!" So we know that alms means money we give to help people who are in need. We don't hear much about county farms in the movies, but we remember that in *The Christmas Carol*, Scrooge has a pair of visitors, on Christmas Eve, who ask him to pledge some money to help the poor. Scrooge asks if there are no workhouses, and we get the impression that a government work house isn't a very nice place.

When I was a child, my father occasionally wired houses on weekends. He brought me along to hold the wire while he pulled the other end down into the basement of the house to hook it to the electrical panel. He and his friend Amos Ford worked together. They told me they needed to do some extra work, or we might end up going "over the hill to the poor house". I wasn't sure what the poor house was, but I got the impression very early that it was important to work hard, because the poor house wasn't a place I wanted to go. By the way, is there a song about going over the hill to the poor house? I gathered from my father that there was. When I got married, I learned that my husband's father actually lived on Warren County's Poor House Farm, because *his* father, Hezekiah Cooper, was the farm's last director. The Warren County farm was sold at least a half a century ago!

Let's spend a few minutes examining early Virginia attitudes about poverty, the poor laws for the Virginia Colony and the origins and history of our county farm. As we do so, I think you will be impressed with our ancestors and predecessors.

As soon as the first ships landed in Virginia, the colonial government began to set up a system of law and order. Early Virginia used the English system of counties and parishes. The county, like today, was the local governmental system that kept order, recorded transactions and collected taxes. Counties were divided into districts, and each district was represented by a justice. Justices worked with the sheriff and the county clerk to maintain up-to-date tax rolls and make sure the taxes were collected. They saw to the building and maintenance of the county court house, and they assisted the county clerk in the production and collection of county records. Often the local militia captains were also justices, and many justices served on the parish vestry. The county justices also supported, and sometimes pressured the parish vestries in their duties to the parish.

When the Virginia House of Burgesses set up a new county, they also organized the people in that area into a new parish or parishes. Thus Shenandoah County was first organized as Dunmore County, and within the same boundaries it was also Beckford Parish. The House of Burgesses generally consulted with the people in the area, before they set up these boundaries, and the vestry members were supposed to be elected by the people they represented.

Collecting the tithe was one of the vestry's most important jobs. All parishioners were required to pay a tithe, or tax, to support the parish church. This church was the "established church" or the Church of England. The parish vestrymen were responsible for maintaining the church properties and paying a minister. Parishes were required, by law, to provide a farm for the minister called a *glebe*. At times the law stated that a glebe should be no smaller than one hundred acres. This figure was later raised to two hundred, and then reduced again to one hundred. Some glebes were much, much larger.

Until 1772, Shenandoah County (or Dunmore County, as it was then called) was part of Frederick County, and Beckford Parish fell within the bounds of Frederick Parish. As the leaders from Frederick began to consider the best organization for a new county and parish, they faced an interesting dilemma – the area in question was full of people of German and Swiss descent! These German speakers needed a minister of German origin. But where could they find an Anglican minister who spoke German? Fortunately, when they posed their question to the father of the Lutheran Church in America, he just happened to have a son, Peter, who needed a job. In 1771, the people of Beckford Parish, in the newly organizing county of Dunmore, sent a proposal to Peter Muhlenberg. They offered to give him the new position as Rector of Beckford Parish if he would travel to London to receive ordination as an Anglican minister. You know the rest of that story. Muhlenberg received his ordination from the Bishop of London, April 25, 1772, and returned to the Shenandoah Valley. There he met with the new Beckford Parish Vestry composed of the following members: Burr Harrison, John Wolfenberger, Joseph Pugh, John Tipton, Henry Nelson, Abraham Keller, Jacob Holdman, Henry Fravel, Philip Hoofman and Frederick Sonner. Four of these men were actually true members of the Anglican Church! Burr Harrison and Henry Nelson were Anglicans from Eastern Virginia. John Tipton was a Maryland Anglican, while Joseph Pugh once had rented a pew in the Anglican Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. We can identify at least five more of these men as Germans.

The church wardens had promised Muhlenberg an income comparable to two hundred and fifty pounds Pennsylvania Currency, and they told him they would supply him with a house and farm "of at least two hundred acres of extreme good land".

In 1774, the vestrymen of Beckford Parish (including all of the above except Wolfenberger, along with George Keller, Lawrence Snapp and Tavener Beale) made good on their word when their two representatives, Joseph Pugh and George Keller, purchased two tracts of land in the Maurertown area. The first piece of land consisted of one hundred and eighty-nine acres and was purchased from John George Storm and Barbara for four hundred and forty pounds Virginia money. The second tract of forty-three acres cornered the first. It was obtained from John and Delilah Mauck for twenty pounds of current money.

The names of Joseph Pugh and George Keller tell us something about the organization of the vestry. Virginia law required the election of at least twelve vestrymen. The vestry then selected a smaller number to act as church wardens. Joseph Pugh and George Keller were acting in that capacity when they bought the Glebe, but both these men held other significant jobs in the county government. Joseph Pugh was an honest to goodness Anglican. He was actually born in Chester County, Pennsylvania in a Quaker household, but he chose to marry an Anglican wife. The Quakers disowned him, and he spent the rest of his life as an Anglican. George Keller, on the other hand, was of German descent. Undoubtedly, the vestry selected one church warden to represent the Englishmen in the community, and the other church warden represented those of German background. This religious cooperation would remain a hallmark of community relations in Shenandoah County for many years.

The parish vestry had other duties we would find strange or annoying today. Indeed, it is now politically incorrect to think that our early Virginia ancestors gave us much of value, and their Anglican Church has had terrible press in the past few years. Last summer, Bill Clinton, referred to Episcopalians,

the descendents of the Anglicans as “the frozen chosen”. But I think Bill needs to read some history. Perhaps the attitude toward our early Virginia ancestors will soften as we celebrate the four hundredth birthday of our Commonwealth next year?

Virginia law required that vestries take up a tax or tithe, not only to maintain the church and the minister, but also to care for the parish poor. The entire basis for our beliefs about poverty came from the English view of the poor as it was expressed in the parish system. Virginians believed that there would always be poor among them, and they thought that most of these people deserved and required a certain amount of help. Early Virginians categorized the poor according to their needs. Some poor people simply could not work. They were either too old, or they had some misfortune that prevented them from making a living. Those people couldn’t help their condition, and the laws ordered that the old and infirm be sustained and comforted. Since Virginia was a rural colony, work houses were not generally a popular solution, so people in the community housed and fed these indigent. These providers were then reimbursed by the vestry.

The parish laws recognized a second set of poor, these were children who were born out of wedlock and who had no fathers. In a patriarchal, rural society, a child without a father required a lot of attention, so these children were usually taken from their mothers and indentured to a farmer or craftsman in the community for quite a long time. Sometimes they were in service until the age of thirty! I believe our ancestors suspected that without a long and thorough period of supervision, these children might grow up to be immoral like their parents. The mothers of these “bastards” may have received some financial support, but it usually came with a good whipping in the public square! The vestry did not set the punishment; they identified the problem, and then turned the woman over to the county justices to mete out the medicine.

There were also orphans and others in the community who were temporarily down on their luck. Perhaps a family had lost their house to fire, or they were the victims of an epidemic. Revolutionary soldiers left orphans and widows, or were just away for so long they couldn’t make a living. If the vestry determined that a person or family needed temporary help, they provided it, but only for as long as it was needed. Again, ordinary citizens stepped in to help these unfortunates. Orphans, who had once belonged to families, were indentured, but the period of indentureship was much less – until the age of eighteen or twenty-one. Most of them were taken in by relatives or neighbors.

Finally, Virginians recognized that some people were genuinely lazy, and they took steps to force those people to take care of themselves and their families. Vagrants and dead beat dads found themselves indentured or escorted out of the parish. Their wives and children were taken away from them and received some form of aid. For example, it was ordered that John Simms and wife be summoned to appear at the next court to show cause if any they have why their children ought not to be bound out by the church wardens of this parish.

Did this system work? The answer is that usually, yes it did. Vestry men were not only responsible for finding people to take care of the poor, and for paying those people, but they were also supposed to check, from time to time, for any signs of abuse or neglect. In 1776, the vestry heard a complaint against John North that he was abusive to his indentured servant, Solomon Carrier. North was the coroner, a militia captain, and a county justice. But that didn’t protect him from the law. The parish learned that another prominent citizen had fathered a bastard child, and they insisted that he put up a substantial bond as a promise that this child would not become a burden to the parish. If the vestrymen slacked off on their duties, the county justices were supposed to step in and order *them* to get to work! In 1778, thirty-one men sent a petition to the Virginia House of Burgesses asking for a vestry election, because they said the Beckford Parish Vestry was neglecting its duties. Several of these men were *actually* vestry members, and several more held important county offices. Ordinary citizens could also be watchdogs for the unfortunate. The citizens in the Fort, for example, signed a petition, to remove a neighbor from the tax rolls because they said he had been an invalid for months, and they thought his health would not improve. There are other references from the court minutes where the church wardens asked that children be indentured by the county justices so they could learn a trade. Orphans became wagon-makers, weavers, tailors, farmers etc. Often their contracts said they should be taught to read,

write and cipher. Occasionally, a contract for indenture shows up in the county records, and we can read exactly what the master was expected to do for his charge. For example, in 1778, the justices ordered that John and Cary Bernaw, orphans of William Bernaw, be bound to William Hand till they are at the age of twenty-one years and that the said William Hand at the time of their freedom do give each of the said orphans a horse saddle and bridle to the value of sixteen pounds, a warm suit of cloaths and educate them as the law requires. Simultaneously, Henry Hand took in Enis and Augustine Roberts, baseborn children of Ann Roberts. He was required to give them the same treatment. So in this case, orphans were orphans despite their background. (Before Dan Bly began his series From the Rhine to the Shenandoah, he read all the orphan's bonds and compiled a list. This list is available in the county library.)

Because vestrymen were caring for people in their own communities with help from their neighbors, they knew who really needed help. Overall, the vestry records in Virginia indicate that food was plentiful, and that only a few people needed assistance- at least until the Revolution.

While we have few vestry records for Beckford Parish, the records for Frederick Parish are intact, and they tell us quite a bit about care for the poor in our area of the Shenandoah Valley. For example, in 1764, the Parish levy totaled 216,720 pounds of tobacco. In money this was between six and seven pence per tithable. The vestrymen used some of this money to build a poor house in Winchester. They were also building a church. Cornalius Ruddell, who was from present day Shenandoah County, was one of the vestrymen. John Ruddell was paid as a reader on North River. Ruddell was probably leading a congregation as they read from the Prayer Book. The North River Chapel was at Rude's Hill near Mt Jackson.

There were bills for medicines, nursing, a coffin and burial. Thomas Smith supplied several poor people with bread. Some people were given money directly, and some were boarded with families in the community. The parish had a secretary and an attorney. The records do not tell us exactly how many needy sought help, but, in 1764, it appears that there were less than thirty of them in an area that would have included Frederick, Berkeley, Jefferson, Clarke, Shenandoah, Warren Counties and part of Page County today.

Only a few names appear in the records for Shenandoah people. In 1767, George Appler, probably of Woodstock, was removed from the tax rolls because he was too infirm. Nicholas Sehorn was reimbursed because he took care of Catherine Ott, in 1768 and 1769. These were the only notes I could find for us. Perhaps our thrifty Germans were all doing well, or they were taking care of each other?

With the American Revolution, the parish system fell apart. In 1776, a petition for religious freedom circulated throughout Virginia, and at least ten thousand men signed it. The petition was presented to the Virginia House of Delegates by Thomas Jefferson. Basically, the document asked that the citizens of Virginia be freed from taxes to support the Church of England and be permitted to establish their own churches. They wished that all churches be equal in the eyes of the government. (By the way, the Daughters of the American Revolution view a signature on this petition as proof of patriotism, and they accept members who descend from a signer of the petition.) The petition, which is housed in the Library of Virginia, has been published in the Virginia Genealogical Society Quarterly. There are few German signatures, and they are very hard to read. It appears that the petitions were circulated in many Presbyterian and Baptist Churches, but the German communities seemed to be very underrepresented as do the Methodists and Quakers.

Once we had no parish system, we had no way to provide for the poor. Generally, the county justices assumed some of the duties of the old vestries. County taxes paid people to care for their poor neighbors. In 1780, Frederick County appointed Overseers for the Poor, and Shenandoah County decided to ask the legislature for permission to do the same. In May, 1782, the Virginia General Assembly gave the county authority to elect Overseers of the Poor. The act ordered the vestry to settle its accounts for maintenance of the poor with the newly elected overseers, by the first of January. The overseers should have come to court to take the oath and post bond, but I have been unable to find references for them.

Our citizens also came up with a very unique idea. Their minister, Peter Muhlenberg was gone. Their glebe was vacant, and it was not likely that the Anglicans in Shenandoah County would ever be able to support a minister because they were too few in number. So, December 14, 1798, the inhabitants of

Shenandoah County presented a petition to the Virginia General Assembly and asked that they be permitted to keep their glebe for the sole benefit of the county's poor. This is what they said:

“That the Glebe land in the parish of Beckford in the said County of Shenandoah was paid for by the Inhabitants of the said County That the buildings and improvements of the said Glebe are now wasting and going to ruin. That there are now and always have been but few of the Episcopalian persuasion in the said county and the Church Wardens and others who profess themselves of the Episcopal Church in the said County of Shenandoah are of that liberal disposition as becometh free men and Americans and say that one Denomination of Christians and men ought not have any separate privileges or Emoluments over others and therefore are willing that the said Glebe land should be appropriated to some Charitable purpose so as to benefit the good people of the said County of Shenandoah and for that purpose have joined with the rest of their fellow Citizens in this Petition. Wherefore it is our prayer of your Petitioners that the General Assembly will pass and act appropriating the Glebe lands in the said County heretofore claimed by the Protestant Episcopal Church with the appurtenances thereunto belonging for the sole use and benefit of the poor of the said county under the directions of such persons as your Honorable House in your Wisdom may direct.”

The petition was signed first by the church wardens, Abraham Bird and William Aylett Booth. This suggests to us that we still had a vestry, in 1798. It also indicates that the partnership between Germans and English was still working, because Abraham Bird was not actually of English descent – although his name sounds English. Shenandoah County residents, from various parts of the county, signed beneath the churchwardens. Many of the signatures are in German: Philip Kibler, Johannes Pence, George Fetzer, Andrew Bushong, Michael Koontz, Mathias Zehring. Some are signed in English, but we know the men were from German families like George Fravel, Godfrey Wilkins, Jacob Parrot, Daniel Hisey, Nicholas Keffer, John Huddle, John Wiseman and Conrad Wakeman. Finally, there are English names like William Richardson, James Russell and Samuel Way. (Handley Library has a copy of this petition, and it is available on the Library of Virginia Website.)

The Virginia government had been agonizing over the ownership of the parish glebes for several years. For some time, it looked as if they would turn these farms over to the Episcopal churches. But, in 1799, the Virginia General Assembly passed an act that gave the Beckford Parish Glebe to Shenandoah County “to dispose of or appropriate upon such terms and in such manner as they may judge best for the poor of the parish of Beckford...”. In other counties, the General Assembly ordered the sale of glebes, and the proceeds to go for the benefit of the county. In 1804, the United States Supreme Court did interfere for Christ Church and forbade the sale their glebe. But it appears that Shenandoah County was the only county to turn its glebe into a county farm.

So just what did the county have to work with when it established the farm as a home for the poor? Probably not much! Peter Muhlenberg's wife and children lived on the farm, until 1783, but Muhlenberg was away at war. An overseer was selected to run the farm, but this might not have been a very satisfactory solution. Once, Mrs. Muhlenberg wrote to her husband that the overseer had left her, and she had no one to help her run the farm. (In all fairness to the overseer, he didn't really run away, he enlisted and went to fight!) When General Muhlenberg asked George Washington for permission to return home to take care of his family, Washington refused to grant him leave, because he said Peter Muhlenberg was too valuable, and he could not be spared. When Washington finally allowed Peter Muhlenberg to return to the Valley, it was not to look after his own affairs, rather Muhlenberg was ordered to raise and supply an entire new army! Peter Muhlenberg probably had little time to attend to domestic matters.

Did the Muhlenberg family actually live on the glebe? Muhlenberg had purchased the lot across from the court house in Woodstock from Mathias Zehring. The old log chapel, where he preached, actually sat in the middle of the street between his house and the court house in such a way that traffic circled the church as it moved up and down Main Street. It might have made more sense for Muhlenberg and his family to have spent their entire stay in Beckford Parish in a house near the church. But it does appear that there had been a log and brick house on the Glebe Farm, prior to 1800. In the 1930's the WPA surveyed some of the old buildings in Shenandoah County. When they examined the Fanny Leary

Home on Main Street in Maurertown, they recorded that the old house was an early structure of log and straw brick construction. The beams were hand hewn. The pine floorboards of irregular widths, and other architectural features, indicated that the house was really old. Lena Fuller thinks that this Fanny Leary House was indeed the Muhlenberg Home from their arrival in the Shenandoah Valley, in 1772, until their departure, in 1783, and that it was moved to its Main Street location from the county farm.

In 1979, Painter published his history of the Alms House. Mr. Painter was of the opinion that the only building left from Muhleberg's time was the limestone spring house. The spring house door was held in place by strap hinges. The hinges crossed the entire width of the door, and the door frame was held in place by wooden pins.

There is an architectural survey of the farm in the Shenandoah County Archives. It seems to have been produced by Shenandoah County's Preservation Committee, in the 1970's. But I believe it is a copy of a WPA file. The survey describes an "odd shaped rambling institution ...it has been built to at different times. It has five sections, three of which are one story, connected with two two-story sections. Long porches with railing balusters and chamfered post run the entire length of the house, with additional side and back porches of the same type. A general appearance of bleakness prevails throughout." The main part of the house was constructed of pointed brick. There were 32 rooms – 29 large and three small, and 13 brick chimneys listed in this survey. The house was listed as in good condition. Fred Painter said this structure was built, in 1839. This is the building that remains on the farm today.

Mr. Painter found three account books for the Beckford Parish Alms House. Two of them were in private hands. Thanks to Fred, they were placed in the County Archives - which was then under the care of the Woodstock Museum. Now they are in the Shenandoah County Truban Archives in the Shenandoah County Library. Thanks to Linda Varney, they have also been microfilmed, and there is a copy of that film in the County Library.

The first account book for the Alms House covered the period from 1799 to 1817. It began with instructions from Mr. Alex Pollock on how to lay out the records in the book. The account book opens with a touching note that Margaret Carrol was received at the poor house by order of the court, and that she brought with her a small wooden box with old clothes, an old blanket and two old razors. She needed all new clothes.

The records continue to tell us about some of the people who came to the house, and they are full of sales and purchases. The residents worked around the farm to raise wheat, rye, corn and oats. They made hay, hulled beans, and they stored away potatoes and dried apples. They sold wool, and they raised their own flax so they could weave cloth. Sometimes they raised their own livestock including sheep, cows and pigs as well as fowl. They sold soap. Basically, the residents did everything they could to be self sufficient. But the farm had to purchase some necessities. There were orders for nails and shingles to repair the buildings. The residents enjoyed their pipes and tobacco, their chocolate and coffee with sugar. Some of them needed spectacles. Sometimes they hired a blacksmith or a shoemaker. Tools had to be replaced, and the women required needles and scissors. The doctor came, the ministers kept up scheduled services, and sometimes the coffin maker made a visit.

Everybody at the farm pitched in as much as they could. In 1914; the overseers of the poor asked the Board of Supervisors, upon the advice of Dr. D. L. Shaver, for an artificial limb for Joe Riffey. This would enable him to be of some service, as a hand on the farm. The limb was not to exceed \$25.00.

The farm also hired many workers and craftsmen, because the residents could not keep up with all the farm work. This allowed many men in the community to earn additional income. The overseers of the poor also parceled out farm animals all around the county. A Mr. McCauley kept six cattle on his land at Cedar Creek, while some animals grazed the hillsides of the Fort until they were rounded up for slaughter.

In some cases, entire families spent most, or all, their lives at the farm. The last residents remained there until late in the 20th Century. Then, in 1989, the Shenandoah County Alliance for Shelter organized to aid homeless county families. The alliance is a non profit organization and is funded by federal and state grants. People from several churches, including some Episcopalians, were instrumental in the formation of the alliance. The alliance has been able to offer temporary housing to homeless

county families. Families may stay as long as two years, but most are able to get back on their feet in three to six months. While the alliance is now willing to take people from other places in Virginia, all their clients have come from Shenandoah County. Last year, they provided 4,400 nights of shelter for the homeless. The rural atmosphere provided a place of calm for people in turmoil. The fenced yard was a good place for children to play.

Just a few weeks before the exterior wall collapsed, \$30,000 worth of bathroom renovations were completed in the old home. The Alliance for Shelter hopes the county will see fit to fix the old building, but repairs won't be cheap. Since the farm is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the county needs to call in an architectural historian to assess the damage, and offer some advice. It would seem that if the county decided to sell the farm, they would be breaking the law if they allowed even one cent of the sale money to be spent on anything other than the county's poor. The General Assembly Act in 1799 was pretty clear on that subject.

As the glebe, the old farm was once part of the story of a group of people who chose to work together to provide moral guidance for their community. It is a symbol of how Anglicans, Lutherans and Reformed came together to give their county a minister. Peter Muhlenberg was an exceptional man and an awesome general! But he would have been a hero, even if he had not been a military man, because he represented what people can do when they cooperate. The glebe farm should remind us of that.

Then the farm became a symbol of how those people thought about taking care of the poor. It became the only glebe in the state to be reborn as a county poor house farm. Now, like the old limestone court house, it is a symbol that belongs to all county citizens. It stands for what our ancestors believed about caring for the indigent. They said it in writing, and then they made it work for a couple hundred years! Yes, they believed in hard work; they didn't send just anyone "over the hill to the poor house".

Sometimes people say to me, I don't want to help the poor. I don't want to pay the taxes. I think about my ancestors. I think about how they took in the homeless and fed the widows. I think about how they nursed the old people through their last days. I wonder what would have happened to those who found a home on the county farm? Does it matter what our ancestors thought and what they believed in? If it does, what do we do now? What do we do with the artifacts they left behind? If our ancestors could communicate with each other across their language barrier and cooperate to make good things happen in this county, can't we do the same thing?