

## Shenandoah County Farm and Alms House History

Longtime Shenandoah County residents are almost certain to be familiar with the Shenandoah County Farm and Alms House. Here's a short history of this historic and unique place, whose future is currently being considered.

In 1772 the Rev. Peter Muhlenberg became the first pastor of Beckford Parish, serving the community of what is now Shenandoah County, then called Dunmore County. As part of his pastorate he received a salary and the use of an approximately 200 acre Glebe Farm located near Maurertown to provide for his family. After the American Revolution and the dissolution of the established church system, Glebe Farms were disposed of throughout Virginia. In Shenandoah County the Glebe Farm became an institution for the benefit of the poor and was deeded to the County for that purpose in 1798. It is not known exactly what buildings existed on the property at that time. A limestone springhouse may date from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and an early log and brick dwelling on the property is said to have been dismantled and moved nearby where it remains today. The current Alms House was built in 1829 and a kitchen wing to the west and a two-story extension on the south end were built around 1850.

The Alms House was built for its currently used purpose – to provide shelter for those in need. It contains a brick two-story central portion and two 75' wings. A kitchen wing on the west side has provided a food preparation and common area for residents and the two-story addition on the south end has at times been used as a manager's residence. Currently only this southern addition is occupied because of structural problems in the central portion and a collapsed wall in the kitchen wing, which has recently been repaired. Numerous outbuildings of various ages exist on the property including a large barn built in 1952 apparently on the foundation of an earlier structure. A portion of the original acreage is now part of the Shenandoah County Park (approx. 40 acres) and remaining farm acreage is leased for cropland and pasture. A small cemetery for the indigent still exists on the property. The farm played a role in the Battle of Tom's brook with Union troops occupying an encampment on a portion of the farm.

Local historian Fred Painter wrote a short history of the County Farm in 1979 in which he included entries from the manager's account books. They reflected an operation in which the residents were expected to work and contribute to their needs and farm production. Goods manufactured at the County Farm were sold and other goods which the residents could not make for themselves were purchased for their use; food and other items were regularly contributed from the local community. The County Farm was run by the Overseers of the Poor, who reported to the County Board of Supervisors.

As modern social service programs developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the traditional model of the County Farm changed. By the late 1980s there were only a few elderly residents remaining at the Alms House, who were relocated to more suitable facilities. In 1990 the local, non-profit group Alliance for Shelter began its operation at the Alms House to provide shelter for homeless families and to assist them back to self-sufficiency. The Alliance continues to provide shelter and services to Shenandoah County residents in need at the Alms House.

Our Alms House is the last remaining purpose-built county "poorhouse" still in operation in Virginia and one of very few structures built for that purpose still standing. Its existence speaks to the sense of responsibility that the citizens of Shenandoah County felt about taking care of the less fortunate in the community from our earliest days.

This moment from the past was presented by the Shenandoah County Historical Society.