

## POOR FARM PROPOSAL

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

In 2007, when a massive Ch. 40B development was proposed that might stress municipal resources, the Town purchased the land to control its future. Thus, the Town acquired the Wright-Locke Farm, the town's only remaining active agricultural site.

Winchester might have owned a farm long before buying the Locke farm had it heeded the advice of the Overseers of the Poor. In 1890, this five-person group, including two women, took over the duties of supporting the poor and expending appropriations for their relief from the Board of Selectmen. It examined all applications for assistance, personally visiting homes before granting or declining requests. The condition of the town's poor was thus very well known to this board.

One of the Overseers' suggestions, repeated over the years, was to provide a poor house or farm. "One of the chief difficulties we encounter is to find suitable accommodations for the aged and infirm," their first report stated. The Town actually boarded a few paupers unable to take care of themselves at almshouses in Woburn or Tewksbury.



*The Tewksbury almshouse, which housed some paupers from Winchester*

"At a Town Meeting held Friday, July 18, 1890, the proposition to purchase a town farm for the better support and employment of the town poor was seriously considered, but the subject matter of the article was finally referred to the next town meeting for settlement. The next town meeting did not take up the matter and it has been held in abeyance for ten years," the Overseers reported at the end of 1900.

They then noted that the present method of boarding out the town's poor was growing more and more expensive "and the purchase of a farm or home for our poor should not, on the score of economy, be postponed much longer." In their opinion, the costs would only rise and "it would be economy for the town to purchase a town farm very soon."

At the end of 1902, they again called attention to the need for a house or farm. In 1903, they repeated their recommendation for a poor farm, adding that "incidentally, such a home, with a small farm attached, would be a good place to lodge tramps where they could 'work out' their keeping, besides ridding the town hall basement of almost a nuisance."

The Town Hall was viewed as a beneficiary since the Police Department was then located in its basement. A part of the nightly routine for the police, until about 1908, was the housing of tramps. A tramp room, as well as the lock-up, was located in the basement of Town Hall, where

the number of lodgers rose from a few hundred per year to well over 1,000 per year by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, a committee of six was appointed to consider “the question of owning and maintaining a farm for the habitation and employment of the poor” and reported in 1904.

“At the present time,” the committee wrote, “the greater number of neighboring municipalities are owning such farms and maintaining abodes in common for their people dependent upon public support.” The committee reported that “a poor house may sometime become a peremptory requirement for Winchester by reason of its too numerous wards” but did not think that time had come.

“In the annual reports of the Overseers of the Poor it will be discovered that we have very few people wholly supported by the town, and that the entire expense of the Poor Department is remarkably moderate. It is the opinion of the committee making this report that for some years to come the town can provide for its poor as in the past, without a farm or common home, at less expense even than is involved in the costs and maintenance of a farm, and that the happiness and welfare of the poor people would fail of promotion by making an early change of system. Many are helped to only a small extent; many for brief intervals only.”

Because of the limited call upon town resources to benefit the poor and the realization that the poor might shrink from appealing for aid if they could not remain in private homes, “the committee therefore recommends that no action be taken toward the purchase of a poor-farm as long as the present favorable conditions continue.” The issue apparently did not go to committee again.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 25, 2004. This revision supersedes all previous articles.