

Chilton County Alms House/Poor House/Poor Farm

By Derric Scott

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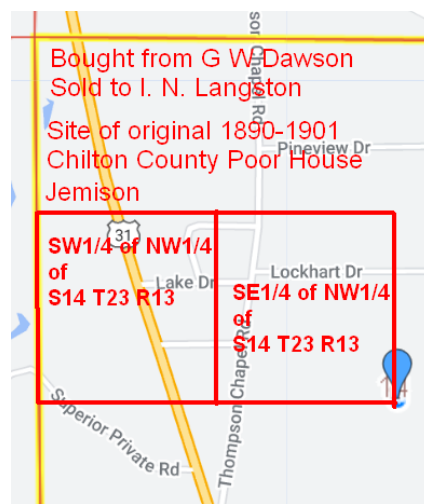
Chilton County Alms House/Poor House/Poor Farm

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“The Poor House” is a term often used but rarely does anyone stop to think that, not so long ago, Poor Houses were real and they were commonplace. When the era of Federal and State “Social Security” began, poor houses disappeared. In the early Twentieth Century every county in Alabama had a poor house. There were several names and spellings that were used interchangeably: Poor House, Poorhouse, Alms House, Almshouse, or Poor Farm. The Chilton County Poor House was actually more accurately called the Poor Farm. There were multiple buildings, including the kitchen, dining hall, cottages, and the hospital. It was also a true farm. Residents that were deemed able by the County Health Officer were required to work, usually in the fields.

In Jan 1885 the Chilton View suggested that the county needed a poor house. In an article many years later William Thomas “Tom” Hand stated that L. T. (Lawson Jefferson) Hand “was instrumental in securing and building the first home in Chilton County for the poor about one mile north of Jemison” about 1890. The Chilton View reported in Nov 1890 that the Board of Revenue purchased the farm of G. W. Dawson at Jemison and established the poor house there. In Dec 1890 it was reported that Peter Quigley would be the keeper and in April 1891 he reported the poor house not yet finished and currently had 5 “inmates” and expected up to 20 when completed.

By 1893 the Chilton County Grand Jury was conducting regular inspections and reporting on their findings; in May they reported that “we find the poor-house well-kept and the inmates well cared for.” The term “inmate” is almost always used to describe the residents, including on the US Federal Census forms. In 1897 the Grand Jury said there was only four inmates and complained that the poor house was about thirteen miles from the Courthouse. Thirteen miles was a significant inconvenience in the days of horse and buggy. They also recommended that the inmates “be restrained from begging on the streets.”



Jemison site of original Poor House from Deed Record Book 48, page 332, sold to I. N. Langston, 4/11/1901.

The distance problem was soon solved. In 1899 the Jemison land was arranged to be sold, but to be run as the Poor House until new land was purchased closer to Clanton. Finally in 1901 the sale of the Jemison original Poor House concluded in April and Judge Adams then bought 80 acres in July 1901 about 5 miles from Clanton on which to build a new “Poor Farm.” This property included the NW ¼ of the SE ¼ of Section 10 Township 22 Range 14 and the road is still called the New Salem / Poor House Road.

As the Twentieth Century began there were two common methods of assisting the poor – the poor house or paying assistance directly to the person. Even in 1893 these methods were being debated and the costs analyzed. In 1903 the County Commission required that “all persons receiving assistance from the county as county poor become inmates of the county Poor House” and at that time there was one man and two women in the Poor House and “49 persons scattered in different portions of the county, residing with friends and relatives.” The Poor House did not have a well and the Grand Jury recommended digging one at once. By the end of 1904 there were twelve inmates at the Poor House and 12 in the county receiving assistance. After that time no other mention of county assistance outside the Poor House is found.

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The debate over personal allowances vs. institutionalized Poor House care effectively ended in 1935 when the U. S. Government passed the Social Security Act. The Alabama State government and other states quickly passed laws allowing the counties to close the Poor Houses and move to the personal pension style payments. These Federal and State dollars actually allowed many counties to save money by closing their Poor Houses and paying allowances instead. Within a couple of years all of Alabama's Poor Houses were closed. The last newspaper mention of Chilton County's Poor House was the Grand Jury report in September 1936 (which was NOT a very positive report, listing numerous improvements that were needed including a larger water supply and that electric power should be provided to the buildings). ((There was a report of a preaching service in July 1940)).

The Grand Jury reports between 1893 and 1936 were, for the most part, very much boiler plate and positive, usually simply stating that "the inmates are well cared for, properly clothed, and fed." Only very rarely was a report negative and recommend significant changes. It does seem that the County Commission was usually responsive to the report and changes that were recommended did often happen soon thereafter – for example when the report said the paint was in poor condition, a contract was soon let to paint the buildings.

There were numerous caretakers, or managers, of the Poor Farm, but a few individuals ran the facilities for long periods: R. A. Miller, W. A. Huckabee, W. C. Burnett, and S. Woodfin Littleton.

The County Poor Farm was also the recipient of considerate giving from the community, most often church organizations, but notably the Thorsby Institute and other Thorsby civic groups made significant annual Thanksgiving and Christmas donations and visits, which were apparently greatly appreciated.

The financial system used for the Poor Farm would be considered by most, today, as flawed and ripe for abuse. The caretaker was paid a flat fee per inmate. The inmates were required to work in the fields of the farm and raise produce for their own use and for sale. All the money went directly to the manager and there seems to be no accounting of those funds. All "left-over" money went to the manager. This system was easy to abuse and it seems there was an occasional manager that took advantage of it to their benefit and the detriment of the welfare of the inmates. Besides financial, there were also claims that some managers used the inmate labor on their own personal farms. (Note – this "pay per inmate to the manager" is still in use in many Alabama counties today for their sheriff and the county prisoners, with no accounting required.)

There were occasionally newspaper letters and articles that were critical of the Poor Farm and claimed that the care was inadequate, that food was poor and inadequate, that medical care was not sufficient and that the fitness requirement for ability to work was sometimes abused; forcing inmates to work that were physically unable. Often the County Commission would investigate, but it always found that the claims were false and unsubstantiated. The September 1917 report was particularly bad and caused uproar in the newspapers and a committee investigation. There were also significant discussions of claimed abuse in the 1930-31 newspapers.

The inmates of the Poor Farm included more than just the elderly destitute. One 1937 newspaper article said that statewide only about 63% of them were over 65 years of age. There were also women, children, and mentally challenged individuals as well as elders with dementia. Also, during the era of segregation, there was no facility for poor black citizens. Practically no black inmates were ever counted in the Poor House with the exceptions of one just after it was created and a woman listed there for a period of years around 1921 – 1925.

In 1935 the U. S. Government passed the Social Security Act. The State of Alabama, in the same year, passed laws allowing the counties to close their Poor Houses/Farms and move to a direct payment assistance model to take advantage of the available, matching style, Federal and State money. The last mention found of Chilton County's Poor Farm was the Grand Jury report of September 1936. In 1936 about half of Alabama's counties had closed their poor houses and by 1938 it was reported that "all but a few" county almshouses were closed in favor of the "old age pensions."

The County Poor Farm buildings were put up for sale in 1943 and the entire property was for sale in 1948.

A photograph of a large, light-colored house with a dark roof and a porch, surrounded by a large green lawn and mature trees. A low stone wall runs across the foreground.

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References

The Union Banner:

The Chilton View: