

**BELKNAP COUNTY
NURSING HOME HISTORY**

REPRINTED FROM COUNTY RECORDS

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Introduction

The earliest records of Belknap County Nursing Home are rather scarce due to the fact that many records which had been stored in a barn on the present North Main Street property were destroyed in a fire in 1973. It is known that what is now known as Belknap County Nursing Home was originally built around 1835 as an insane asylum; Belknap was not even incorporated as a county until 1840. The records available from Gale Memorial Library for this account date back to 1863.

An Early Picture of Belknap County Nursing Home

Sometime in the 1850's, the Belknap County Farm changed from being an insane asylum to a place to support the county's paupers, prisoners, infirmed elderly, as well as the passively insane. According to the "Report of the Expenses Supporting the County Paupers for the County of Belknap," 1863-1870, during the 1860's, the number of paupers supported on the County Farm varied between 34 to 42, the average cost for each being about a dollar per week, thus being a total of between \$1800.00 to \$2200.00 per year. For several years during this period, W. S. Woodman and his wife were overseers of the facilities, living on the property in a section of the main building.

According to *The Laconia Democrat* dated November 30, 1871, the original County Farm buildings were totally destroyed by fire on November 27, 1871, with the loss being estimated at \$10,000.00. While construction of new facilities was underway, some of the people housed in the original building referred to as the "County House" were transferred to the "Holmes House" owned by Mr. T.E. Ladd, while others were taken in by friends or relatives. Some families of Belknap County were actually assigned by the county to provide care for these unfortunate people.

At the County Convention of March 1, 1872, the County Commissioners, Daniel S. Clay, C.S. Prescott, and John W. Wells, were authorized the expenditure of \$10,000.00 for the erection of new County Farm Buildings, as a result, the county constructed a two story building to house the insane, the poor, the infirmed and the elderly, as well as people who had committed criminal acts. The main building, at this time referred to as the "County House," was 72.5 feet in length and 36 feet in width, with an attached "el" of 50 feet by 36 feet. Attics were furnished in both, with a substantial brick and stone basement under the whole structure.

The basement was divided into several apartments by brick-partitioned walls. Some of the "paupers" were housed in these apartments. The Superintendent and his wife, the same people who had been overseers for many years, W. S. Woodman and wife, were allotted housing quarters on segments of the ground and second floors. Also enclosed on the ground floor was a large dining hall, a sitting room, and several sleeping rooms. On the second floor was another sitting room and more sleeping rooms. All rooms in the "el" were used for the infirmed population. All rooms in the "County House" were high posted and steam heated.

A barn was also constructed which had the dimensions of 60 feet by 40 feet. These two buildings, the main house and the barn, were constructed for the cost of just over \$9500.00. Mr. Woodman utilized his force of "paupers" to the fullest in this construction, which included all of the stone work required and cutting of lumber. Of the 170,000 feet of lumber required 150,000 feet of this was cut by the "paupers" from property of the County Farm itself.

All of the brick work for the construction was completed by Messrs. B.S. and B.C. Tuttle of Meredith, while the necessary woodwork was provided by Mr. D.M. Page of Tilton. According to the *Lake Village Times* (the Lakeport newspaper) of February 15, 1873, the buildings were completed and ready for occupancy at that date.

During its first year of operation, 63 "paupers" were supported on the County Farm at a total cost of \$3,743 .00, an average per person being approximately \$1.14 per week. The Superintendent and his wife as overseers received a salary of \$900.00 per year, combined.

It is interesting to note just whom the county referred to as "inmates" or most especially "paupers" during this period of time and subsequently. In the eyes of the county, a "pauper" was anyone who was destitute of funds; anyone who was dependent upon charity from the county. The county also made reference to its "external paupers," those people living outside in the communities of the county dependent upon charity; however, it was deemed less expensive to house any or all of the following at the facilities of the County Farm; people of any age who could not afford hospitalization, mothers and children who had lost their provider, people who could not afford to pay taxes, disabled and indebted veterans, the aged, persons committing criminal acts, youngsters needing "reform," and also the passively insane.

As a note of comparison, the cost to the county for its "external paupers" from March 1873 to March 1874 was \$6,036.53. The figure of \$3,743.00 for the support of the "paupers" at the County Farm show a considerable difference.

In the *Annual Report of the County Commissioners of Belknap County for 1876*, the main building on the County Farm was referred to as the "Alms House." Even this change in name is a reflection of the county's, as well as society's attitude toward poverty; negative, for the most part. As the qualities of industry and self-improvement were extremely prevalent in the philosophy of the period, there was little sincere compassion for those who could not provide for themselves. The stigma of being a "pauper" was very obvious throughout the annual records kept of those receiving county aid. It was a matter of public record of those who received such aid, how much was spent on each, and how long one might have had to "reside" at the County Farm.

The County Farm to the Turn of the Century

In the early 1880's, a Dr. H.E. Mace joined the staff of the County Farm, one of the first (if not the first) physicians employed by the county. In the years of providing medical care for the "paupers," Dr. Mace was very concerned over poor sanitary conditions brought about by substandard waste drainage, poor ventilation, and possible-contaminated water, especially within the "Alms House." Dr. Mace was also very concerned over the combining of passively insane people with the elderly and infirmed population. He feared a tragedy would result regarding an insane impulse toward the rest of the "inmates."

Due to Dr. Mace's concerns over unsanitary conditions, new drainage and ventilation systems were installed. During this same time, a new water supply was provided by constructing a windmill on "Round Bay" (Lake Opechee) to bring soft pure water from "Round Bay" to the County Farm. This was done by special arrangements made with Dr. J.L. Perely whose property the water crossed enroute to the farm. Dr. Perely assumed a portion of the expenses and was supplied fresh water himself.

During the later 1880's, bathtubs were installed in the "Alms House." Water closets were installed, replacing some of the outhouses already in use. It was also at this time that fire-fighting hoses were provided, allowing the county to purchase fire insurance for the facilities.

In reading Dr. Mace's recommendations and description of conditions in the annual county reports from this period one can realize that he was responsible for much needed improvements in what he called "deplorable conditions" at the County Farm. Dr. Mace, as well as the superintendents and matrons he worked with, initiated a great deal of the changes which were to come about in future years.

Reverend Lucien A. Ladd became the County Farm Chaplin in the year 1890, providing religious instruction for the various institutions of the Farm. Services were held on each Sabbath afternoon, and Chaplin Ladd was assisted by members of different local Christian groups.

Another major change brought about in the 1890's was the separation of the passively insane population from the other "inmates." These people were transferred to a different ward, and the general conditions of the insane were greatly improved.

As a whole, it can be seen that the living conditions of the County Farm were greatly improved from the 1880's to 1900. It is interesting to note, however, that the county was receiving complaints from the county doctors and other staff members concerning substandard conditions that needed to be improved.

County Farm: Early 1900's

At the turn of the century, the County Farm consisted of approximately 350 acres of land and had become rather self-sufficient. The land was productive enough to supply a large percentage of the necessary foods for the County Farm. In some instances, the excess was large enough to allow some bartering with local businesses on the county's part. For example, 3,160 pounds of butter was produced, of which 1,200 pounds were exchanged for groceries. Also indicative of this productivity were: the slaughtering of over 4,000 pounds of pork, nearly 2,500 pounds of poultry. From the fields, 900 bushels of potatoes were realized.

From the years 1900 to 1910, due to the self-sufficiency of the Farm, the total County Farm budget remained around \$10,000.00 per year. During this ten year span, the population of "inmates" fluctuated between 50 and 65. The average cost per "inmate" for a week was approximately \$2.50.

At the outbreak of World War I in 1917, the County Farm expenses increased due to the marked decrease in the number of paupers and prisoners. Many of such were discharged from the facilities to take part in the war effort. Due to the lack of manpower, several pieces of farm machinery were purchased, which solved the help situation in those particular areas requiring such. Without this machinery, much of the work could not have been completed at the proper time.

Due to the increased inflation caused by the war, the average cost for board per person was \$4.24 per week. The county, however, was able to function under a total budget appropriation of approximately \$15,000.00 per year due to the decrease of the population on the Farm.

The period following World War I and into the 1920's is characterized by prosperity yet a high cost of living. Due to these factors, the overall operation of the County Farm was affected. The number of "inmates" dropped at the County Farm, because more people were working and fewer people qualified for charity or placement at the County Farm. For example, in 1920 the population at the Farm was only 37, and throughout the remainder of the 1920's, the average stayed under 40.

Even though the total population dropped at the Farm during this period, there was an increase in the number of children housed at the "Alms House." This was largely due to a law passed in 1920 giving state and county officials the authority to take children from their homes where living conditions were considered substandard.

During this same period of time, Belknap County was concerned with an increase in the number of cancer patients at the County Farm. *The Belknap County Report of 1923* states: "As there is a constantly increasing number of cases of cancer and other contagious diseases coming to the farm, it has become necessary, for the protection of the other inmates, to provide special quarters for them . . ." In order to quarantine these people, a section of what was previously used as the insane ward was remodeled.

In the late 1920's many improvements were made at the farm: fire escapes were installed on the living quarters, a fire alarm system was added to the facilities, a new high pressure steam boiler replaced the previous one, lightening rods were placed on the building, and even two large refrigerators were purchased.

During this same period, the attitude of the county's communities showed a definite change concerning their "paupers," especially those housed at the County Farm. It appears that more compassion was being shown by individuals and various groups.

Local service clubs were assisting the inmates in observing special events and holidays. The Laconia Kiwanis Club furnished special musical programs on various holidays such as Thanksgiving. Also several groups throughout the area went to the County Farm during the Christmas season to sing carols and hymns, many of whom were bearing gifts for the "inmates."

Gale Memorial Library was generous in supplying "suitable" reading materials. The County Chaplin was receiving assistance at the monthly church services from members of the community by means of vocal and instrumental selections and social gatherings following the services.

The first three decades of the twentieth century, as seen through the Belknap County reports, show a great deal of improvement in many areas for the Belknap County Farm. Not only were physical conditions greatly improved but the overall attitude toward the "pauper" seemed also to improved somewhat. The stigma of being a "pauper" was still prominent, but due to the time of prosperity, people were less reluctant to contribute toward the welfare of the county paupers.

Belknap County Home and Infirmary 1950's and 60's

During the later 1940's and subsequently into the 1950's and 60's, what had previously been referred to as the "Alms House," was now called the "Belknap County Home and Infirmary." In the mid-1950's, persons cared for at the County Home were now being referred to as "patients" rather than "inmates." In this period, an average number of patients being cared for per day was 48, with 97% of these being supported through welfare, and the remainder being self-sustained. To show a difference in the philosophy at this time in contrast to earlier periods, it is stated in the *Commissioners' Report of 1956*, "This has been a capacity year for the Infirmary as more and more chronic patients are in need of the type of care rendered at the Infirmary." In short, all types of geriatric cases were being admitted to the County Infirmary.

At this time, the County Farm continued to produce its normal requirements of fruits, vegetables and meat. These were processed for future use, and much of it stored in a new Walk-In freezer purchased in 1955.

In the later 1950's, the number of patients admitted to the Infirmary had increased substantially. For example, by 1959, an average of 75 patients per day were cared for. The majority of these persons were unable to adjust physically or mentally in homes yet could not be admitted to mental hospitals. The last few years of the 1950's displayed an increasing number of wheelchair and disoriented patients being admitted.

The year 1958 brought about a significant change which benefited the social and therapeutic needs of the patients. On December 1, finances were provided by the Spaulding Charitable Trusts to establish the first therapy group, and a professional Occupational Therapist joined the staff. With this addition came a new arts and crafts program which initiated many social events for the patients, such as parties, visiting choral groups, and various activities provided by local service groups.

The County also provided chaplains for both the Catholic and Protestant populations.

In the year 1959, many important changes took place within the Infirmary, such as: a large and more modern sterilizer was installed, a cardex system and file was added so that the record of each patient was always available for the attending physician, and four vari-height beds with full equipment were installed. These beds were a necessity for patients protection since 98% of the patients required bedsides, some both day and night.

Also as late as 1959, the County Farm had a very productive crop and dairy year. The dairy herd had the highest milk production since 1949, 34,150 quarts. The Farm still maintained about sixty head of cattle, along with four workhorses, and several pigs as its livestock.

The year 1960 also boasted of a high yield in crop production; however, Superintendent C. Carl Rollins stated in the *County Report of 1960*, "...perhaps the most significant fact is the reduction of our farming area to a mere 25 acres, which will involve considerable change in the general economy of the Home."

In the *Commissioners' report* of the same year, it was reported that 400 acres of the County Farm property located on the easterly side of Lake Winnisquam and North Main Street was sold to the Laconia Industrial Development Corporation for \$200,000.00 cash. As result of this sale, the County Farm was no longer able to be self-sufficient.

It was at this time that the County Commissioners, Joseph F. Smith, Norman Hubbard, and William I. Stafford, recommended that immediate construction of a 60-bed infirmary be started on the site adjacent to the existing facility. The Commissioners also recommended the following: that the Commissioners be allowed to apply for all state and federal aid available to the County for said construction, that a building committee be established including at least one practicing medical doctor, and that the County Delegation provide architectural and engineering fees necessary before ground is broken.

The year 1961 brought many drastic changes in the general operation and welfare of the Belknap County Home and Infirmary. One of the most significant changes was the auctioning of the milking herd in August 1961, which forced the County to purchase milk and other dairy products from outside sources. Except for a substantially smaller vegetable garden and enough young stock to meet most of the beef and pork needs, the County Farm no longer could be considered self-sufficient.

It also became necessary in 1961 to increase the size of the nursing staff at the Belknap County Home to insure closer supervision and stricter medication control. This naturally reflected

in a greater payroll cost, also new equipment such as beds, mattresses, bureaus, wheelchairs and bed-screens were purchased to further meet the needs of the infirmed and elderly.

July of 1962 was marked by the resignation of Mr. and Mrs. Rollins, Superintendent and Matron. A staff of four department heads was appointed from existing personnel under the direction of Commissioner Ruel as advisor, until Superintendent Harold Strople was appointed in October 1962.

During this time, a new Infirmary office with the installation of a PBX system which included five new telephones was added. New cabinets were built to facilitate procurement of drug supplies. A standard time clock system was initiated to replace the systems of cards supervisors to keep track of employees' hours. Sanitation conditions were also improved by contracting the services of a local waste disposal company. While gardening at the County Farm continued to decline, the meat supply began to increase due to the increased number of pigs and the addition of several head of Black Angus cattle for slaughtering.

In July of 1963, Mr. Strople resigned, and Mr. Perley Beach assumed administration of the County Home and Jail. Throughout the year, there was an increase of incontinent, bed-ridden, and special diet patients admitted. The Infirmary reached a near-capacity of 80 patients. Four registered nurses were now employed at the facility to cover each eight hour shift, with a relief nurse for days off. April 19, 1963, marked the culmination of many years of planning with ground breaking ceremonies taking place at the Home, for a new 40-bed infirmary.

On March 3, 1964, the new infirmary was completed, and 40 bed-ridden patients were moved into the complex. The year 1964 also was when the County Home and Infirmary departmentalized, and a new bookkeeping system which allowed each department in the institution to produce precise costs of operation was initiated.

The Farm ceased to operate in the year 1964. All beef cattle and pigs were slaughtered. Gardening at the Farm was on a medium scale, but Superintendent Beach stated in the County Report that he intended the garden produce for the Home the following year.

In the same year, the Belknap County Convention voted to bond the county for a second unit which would house 40 additional patients. This would replace the former wooden building of the Belknap County Home entirely.

The year 1965 was a busy and prosperous one for the Belknap County Home with the building of a new wing which was opened for occupancy in September. Patients were moved into the new building even before it was completed, due to the fact that the old building had to be evacuated in order to be razed. The County Home now included two wings of a modern, well-equipped infirmary.

Gardening, once again, became the County Home's main outside project. Four tons of string beans and squash had been harvested and frozen. Also, over 900 bushels of potatoes, carrots, and beets were realized from the garden.

On June 21, 1966, the Belknap County Home was dedicated with appropriate exercises, and by the year's end, an average of 96% occupancy was shown in the Infirmary. Due to the efforts of local ministers and Mr. Earl Anderson, a prayer room (today, the chapel) was established on the East Wing, where the patients were able to go for prayer and meditation.

With the acquisition of the new building, the County Home and Infirmary saw an even greater level of interest and involvement on the part of county individuals and organizations from the communities. Both Protestant and Catholic chaplains were providing spiritual guidance on a regular basis. The attending physician, Dr. John C. Eckels, was visiting the County Home from three to five times each week to render care. The high level interest was also reflected in the purchase of a Cable TV donated by a group of anonymous citizens. As a whole, it could be justified in saying that the steps from the original insane asylum of 1835 to the modern County Home complex of 1966 were giant ones, physically and philosophically.

Perley Beach continued to serve as the Administrator of the Nursing Home and Superintendent of the House of Correction & Jail until the summer of 1970 when Thomas N. Myatt was employed as the Superintendent of the House of Correction & Jail.

On June 2, 1976, Perley Beach died in office. His wife, Margaret, served as Acting Administrator until late 1976. Victor Hamel of Rochester, who was retired from the same position at the Strafford County Nursing Home, became the interim administrator for the next two years.

In June of 1978, his brother, Richard J. Hamel, recently retired as a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Air Force, became the administrator for the next four years. He left in June 1982 for a similar position at the Carroll County Nursing Home. The current administrator, Donald D. Drouin, Sr., began his tenure in office on July 8, 1982.

A concerned Board of Commissioners, a dedicated professional staff, and interested volunteers and organizations have made it possible for the silent minority, the elderly of Belknap County, to be heard, to be served, and to be appreciated.

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