

Guide to the Tompkins County Alms House Collection

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Collection Number V-10-1-3

Updated 2022

COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

This collection is an extensive record of a county alms house with primary source material beginning in 1829 with the indenture of three children, and ending with menus and numbers fed from 1939 to mid-July 1940. A number of ledgers and other materials document admissions, discharges, deaths, physician records, poor persons relieved and children placed out. More personal accounts of admittance to the Alms House in the mid-1840s can be found in a judge's report certifying an individual's insanity, copies of correspondence to and from Governor William Seward and copies of family letters describing the actions of a mentally ill relative and his admittance and discharge from the New York State Lunatic Asylum in Utica. There are annual reports from the county's Supervisor of the Poor beginning in 1834, many financial accounts and an 1841 property inventory. Because the Alms House was also a working farm, there are records of farm production, expenses and sales.

Secondary sources include an 1879 newspaper article critical of the Alms House and a rebuttal, as well as newspaper articles from the 1980s on the decision to close the facility and features on the residents and their lives.

Stemming from New York State legislation, the creation and administration of the Poor House, as it was originally called, was under the jurisdiction of the county's Board of Supervisors, made up of the town supervisors from each town. This board appointed a Poor Master to run the establishment, as well as requiring annual financial accounts from each town's Supervisor of the Poor.

The Alms House property on Perry City Road east of its intersection with current Route 96 eventually consisted of a residence for the Poor Master, barns, outbuildings and a dormitory. It was a fully integrated farm of 100 acres where all able bodied residents were expected to work. The livestock, dairy products and produce grown on the farm were either sold or consumed by the residents. In later years, the Alms House became known as the County Farm. However, in 1981, the county legislature voted to end farming operations there due to rising labor and operational costs and recent government regulations. In December of 1986, declining enrollment,

deteriorating buildings, liabilities and new state regulations caused the county legislature to close the County Home by the end of 1987. In 2010, the remaining property and buildings were bought by members of the Twelve Tribes, an international religious confederation of self-governing communes.

CONTAINER LIST

Contents	Folder #
Indenture of Children 1829-1839	1
List of Paupers Receiving Assistance Nov. 1831-Nov. 1832	2
1836-37 Annual Report of Superintendents of the Poor	3
1837-38 Annual Report of Superintendents of the Poor	4
1840-41 Annual Report of Superintendents of the Poor	5
1842 Copy of Gov. William Seward Correspondence on Utica Asylum for the Insane	6
Five Records for James Kimple and Family, 1843, Enfield	7
Two Testimonials Against Removal of Superintendent of the Poor, N. Ayers	8
Account of Paupers Chargeable to County and Towns 1844-54 (ledger)	9
Judge's Report Certifying Individual for Admittance to Utica Asylum 1847	10
1848-51 Letters from Groton Resident on Brother's Admittance	11
Names and Statistics of All Persons Admitted to Poor House 1854-77 (ledger)	12
Petition to County Supervisors to Fund Gospel Preacher (n.d.)	13
Record of Inmates c.1875 (ledger on shelf)	
1879 Newspaper Articles on Alms House	14
Names and Statistics of Alms House Admissions 1877-1908 (ledger on shelf)	
Box 2	
Statistics of Poor Persons Relieved, Children Placed Out 1895-1927 (ledger)	

Contents	Folder #
Record of Applications to Alms House 1898-1899 (ledger)	15
List of Residents and Their Expenses, General Expenses, Farm Sales 1899-1929 (ledger)	16
Accounts 1900-1913, Admissions, Discharges, Deaths 1934-38 (ledger)	17
Copies of 1962 & 1972 Articles on J. P. and Eunice Jones	18
Three Newspaper Articles (1980, '82) on Last Years of Alms House	19
Originals: 1962 & 1972 Articles on J. P. and Eunice Jones FRAGILE	20
 Box 3	
Accounts 1907-17, Admissions and Deaths 1928-29, Tramps 1933-34	21
Record of Days Residents in Alms House 1907-30	22
Physicians' Record 1919-1930 (ledger loose in box)	
 Box 4	
Menus 1/19/1939 to 5/19/1939, with numbers of residents fed	23
Menus 9/29/1939 to 2/21/1940	24
Menus 2/22/1940 to 7/15/1940	25
Annual Report from Supervisor of the Poor Nov. 1834-Nov. 1835	26
Records and Bills 1834-1848	27
Miscellaneous Financial Records 1839-1877	28
Expense Accounts Submitted to County 1839-40, 1842-43	29
Annual Report from Supervisor of the Poor 1840	30
Three 1840-41 Vouchers	31
Inventory of Property 1841	32

Contents	Folder #
1843 Alms House Inspection Report	33
Bills and Receipts Exchanged Between Towns and Ulysses 1844	34
Amount of Pork Bought 1871-92 (ledger)	35
Financial Transactions Connected to William Beers 1872 and 1886	36
Property Inventories 1872, 1882, Expenses 1872-89 (ledger)	37
Income, Sales and Expenses 1886-1894 (ledger)	38
Box 5	
Superintendent of the Poor: Accounts with the County 1892-98, 1901 (ledger)	39
Expense Records 1892-1901 (ledger)	40
Farm Account Records 1892-1901, pages 274-306 missing (ledger on shelf)	
Proceedings of the Twenty-third Annual Convention of the County Superintendents of the Poor of the State of New York, 1893	41
1919 Property Purchase Map	42
Salary Accounts of Alms House Employees 1898-1905	43
Sales and Receipts of County Farm 1929-1938 (ledger on shelf)	
Sales and Expenses for Farm and Home Dec. 1938-Dec. 1942	44
Expense Accounts and Farm Records and Sales 1938-1943 (ledger loose in box)	
Records of Employment Dec. 1938-Jan. 1946 (ledger loose in box)	
Property Description 2022	45