

The Anderson County Poor Farm: 1895-1963

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 26, 2023)

This Historically Speaking column is brought to us by Leo York, a fellow historian, located in Claxton, TN. He was instrumental in getting the Anderson County Poor Farm recognized by a historical marker from the Tennessee Historical Commission. I was pleased to be at the unveiling of that marker and asked Leo to write this column. Enjoy learning more about our area's history.

A place to care for the poor, the elderly, the insane and the mentally and physically handicapped has always been a societal need for the people. Early in our state's history our elected officials enacted merciful legislation to grant local bodies the ability to create an almshouse or Poor Farm to care for the less fortunate.

Anderson County has had at least two different poor farms. There was a small 56-acre farm in Pop Hollow along Spring Street north of Clinton which closed in 1888. Poor Farms were originally created to care for those that could not care for themselves. The able-bodied poor were sold or auctioned off by the local government being placed in indentured servitude and worked alongside enslaved blacks. Servitude was a practice held over from the English and was continued here in the United States through and after the American Civil War.

A notation in the Anderson County Quarterly Court Minutes of 1864 transcribed:

“ Sale of paupers of Anderson County for the year 1864

Rowan Clear keeps Polly Loyston at \$100 per annum

Wm Raines to keep Jane Smith at \$100 per annum and John Raines and wife at \$140 per annum

Solomon Brummet to keep Susan and Sally Argubrite at \$200 per annum

Nancy Elliott to keep Thomas Elliott for \$80 per annum

WW Talley to keep James Cruse, Polly Raines, Nancy Cogbern, and James Cogbern at \$270 per annum”

There are no records of what became of those who were sold into indentured servitude or of what their life experiences may have been. We can only speculate what this life held.

Anderson County's second poor farm was founded after a search by Arvil Taylor, Dolf Lowe and Sam Moore, farm commissioners appointed by the squires of the Anderson County Quarterly Court (forerunner of county commission.) Five different farms were evaluated. The 390-acre Stephen Bradley Farm located near the Emory Road and the Lea Ferry Trail (now the renamed Old Emory Road and Blockhouse Valley Roads) became available through Bradley descendant Sarah 'Sallie' McKamey Kincaid.

The land was still a working farm with all the buildings, barns, sheds, silos and farm implements available to continue the planting and harvesting without interruption. The county erected six two-room cottages for the inmates and a larger house for the superintendent and his family. This house had a communal kitchen and long dining hall where inmates and hired farmhands were served their meals collectively.

The most fertile land was the approximate 100 acres along the Clinch River. Bushels of corn, beans, potatoes, beets, turnips, and other produce was grown for farm usage and for market. Farming was a lucrative local industry prior to the Industrial Revolution. Pork and beef were sold to local packing companies. Profits exceeding operational needs were turned over to the county coffers.

While profitable the farms primary directive was to care for the lone 95-year-old widow. The farm was created to provide housing for the 8-year-old abandoned boy with birth defects. It was created to house the insane, the deaf, the blind and the illiterate. Here were housed those with incurable contagious diseases such as syphilis and tuberculosis.

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The first cottages built to house the inmates at the Poor farm had according to records, "iron cages and 7-foot-high fences to keep the inmates in". The farm was no utopian haven or sanctuary in those early years.

On July 1, 1895, 17 inmates were slated to be the first residents of the second poor farm. Nancy Cogbern, James Cruze, John Hamilton, Susan Hankins (col), Mary Claxton, Mrs. Hardy Martin, Henry Lea (col), Temperance Duncan (col), Richard McQueen, Martha Morrow, Mrs. Scarbrough, James Beets plus five unidentified children were the first of many over the next seven decades. The superintendent along with his wife changed frequently often serving only a one-year term.

The following is an excerpt from the unpublished memoir of Delia Grace Cox pinned in 1986.

"At the time of their marriage in June of 1896, Father was Superintendent (the title might have been 'overseer') of the Anderson County Poor Farm for indigent. It was a productive farm, I think just east of the Clinch River and both men and women, black and white, could live there while in dire need. They all worked unless severely crippled; the men on the farm and the women in housekeeping and what women did in that day.

"The superintendent was paid a salary in addition to housing and food. There was one large building which contained the superintendent's living quarters, a kitchen for preparing meals for all and a large dining room for the 'inmates' as Mother called the indigents. The superintendent's living quarters had a private dining room but had the same food prepared for all.

"The indigents were housed in small cottages instead of in one large building. I think each cottage had two rooms and each person had a separate room for his use, except a husband and wife would use the same room. Most of the people were older and for some good reason had come to want. Mother spoke well of two black women who helped in the kitchen.

"I don't remember how large the superintendent's apartment was, but believe it had a dining room and two other rooms to be used as wished. Each person kept his/her own room, except when too ill. Mother laughed about it but had to endure some jokes about getting married and moving to the 'Poor House.'

"Too, in later years, we were warned about being wasteful and 'dying in the poor house.' Father finished out his contract for one year there and moved away."

The Quarterly Court appointed a county physician annually. Most served for several years. Drs John Clear, Sam Taylor and J.M. Cox at differing intervals were assigned the duties of providing healthcare to the poor farm inmates. Rounds were by horseback or sully in the early years. "Nursing" care was provided by the matron, the superintendents wife (an unpaid position).

The population of inmates, it was once warned and quite possibly at other times, by the county physician must be reduced immediately as scarlet fever was running dangerously high and was rampant among the children. Illegitimate births were not uncommon despite attempts to keep the inmates separated. A drunken hired farm hand was once found in a compromising state with an already pregnant inmate. With this discovery calls from the Quarterly Court were demanded of the poor farm management to resign.

Women from the neighboring church congregations of Farmers Grove, Zion and New Salem would visit and bring with them clothing, quilts, and other treats. Sometimes it was just a comforting hand or voice loaned for a brief but caring moment. At other times they were there to administer to the needs of the sick, the dying or the dead.

The court did not employ the expenses of an undertaker as it is noted that a line is drawn through that box on the death certificates. The earliest records noted that the construction of a wood coffin could earn the builder \$3.00. The cost of burial was set at no more than \$15.00. There is a cemetery there on the old

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Poor Farm not far from the river on a wooded knoll next to the railway tracks. Well over 100 graves are there the majority marked by a small shard of marble with no information inscribed identifying who is buried in those graves.

John Yarber is buried there. He was about eight years old when he was left in 1897 at the farm to the care of strangers by his parents. The extent of his congenital disorder was not recorded. He could not read or write when he signed up for the draft for World War I. He was denied enlistment as he had a "withered hand and aortic heart disease". John died at age 38 spending almost the entirety of his life at the Poor Farm. Who were his parental figures over the years? The position of superintendent and his wife changed frequently. We can only speculate that life for John as a child, as a teen, as a young adult had to be wrought with difficulties. John is buried in an unidentified grave.

Rhoda Frost Horton was buried here in 1909. Her term of stay at the poor farm was not determined. Her reason for being here was never revealed. Rhoda was married to Richard Horton a confederate soldier who at wars end abandoned her and their four minor sons moving to Kentucky to remarry. Rhoda may have suffered from dementia with family being fearful of her "out of her right mind" statements. She may have had TB. There are no records showing her reason for placement at the farm. Rhoda's grave is the only grave in the Poor Farm Cemetery marked with a headstone giving her identity.

Temperance Duncan died that same year in 1909. Tempy was one of those two black womenfolk mentioned earlier that helped in the kitchen and with the housekeeping. Tempy was born in 1813. She gained her emancipation with the end of the American Civil War. She was one of the very first placed here in 1895 at age 82. She was 96 when she died the result of a stroke. She is now buried here in an unidentified grave marked by a small shard of marble.

Long time railway worker James Graham of Clinton retired to the poor farm from Southern Railway with tuberculosis. He worked for years side by side with his sons. Now at 74 he was isolated from his sons and his grandchildren. His wife had already passed. James lived for two months after coming to the farm then died and was buried in the Poor Farm Cemetery. His grave with no identifying information.

Frank Seagraves as reported by the Anderson County News, Saturday, July 8, 1905 "...aged 19, was drowned in the Clinch River Saturday, near the county poor farm, at which he had been an inmate for more than a year. The circumstances of the drowning while presumably accidental is unknown as no one was with him at the time. His clothes were found in a boat some distance from the body, and he was probably drowned while in the act of bathing, as he could not swim.

The body was found several hours after his clothes were discovered. Seagraves was a mental unfortunate being subject to frequent epileptic attacks which rendered him incapable of performing labor. For several years he peddled newspapers on the streets of Clinton until his disease grew with age and he became a helpless charge of the county. His remains were buried Sunday afternoon at the county farm."

The Prophet of Oak Ridge, John Hendrix was briefly confined here at the Poor Farm. He was considered by some to be insane. He talked of massive plants in the Bear Creek Valley with railways and an influx of people to Robertsville and Scarbrough. A Great War would be impacted by what took place here. John didn't stay long he dug out, the iron cages and seven-foot fences could not contain him. He prophesied to those that pursued him that "that evil place will burn down". And burn it did.

George Searle was here in 1910. He was born in England and migrated to the United States gaining citizenship in 1880. George was 74 and widowed when he came to the farm. We wonder how someone that was born in England was now nearing the end at a poor farm in Anderson County. His story ran cold as his paper trail ended abruptly.

There are no records or logs listing those who became inmates at the County Poor Farm. Most of the information has been found within the Anderson County Quarterly Court minutes that are in large red

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bound books in the county archives. Some of the poor farm deaths are mentioned in those minutes as reported by the county physician. Hundreds of death certificates reviewed from 1914 up through 1956 revealed another group of recorded deaths and burials. Approximately 60 names of the approximately 110 graves have been identified and are maintained on a list.

The highest number of residents at the poor farm was during the years of the Great Depression. With a normal average of 17 inmates that numbered ballooned to an average of 35. Some souls were here for a very brief period then moved on. Others spent decades or their entire lives here. The 1940 and 1950 US Census showed whole family groups taking refuge here. Hired farm hands lived with their family in tenant housing on the farm.

The children of inmates, hired hands, and of the superintendent, could attend school at the very near one room York School. When this school closed in the late 1920's, attendance was offered at Claxton and South Clinton Elementary Schools. School was not always mandatory. The 1940 census noted that a 16-year-old boy had only advanced to the 6th grade and a 14-year-old girl had advanced only to the 4th grade.

The Poor Farm Cemetery has been forgotten, neglected, and abandoned now for decades. Only a small hand full of visitors have sought its location. One vandal did visit sometime between 2015 and 2020. That person took the time to smash the one headstone there. The headstone of Ronda Horton the only marked and identified grave was desecrated. This cemetery and the adjacent Bradley Family Cemetery have recently been recorded with the office of the County Property Assessor. Signs and corner posts to mark the boundaries of the cemetery have recently been placed.

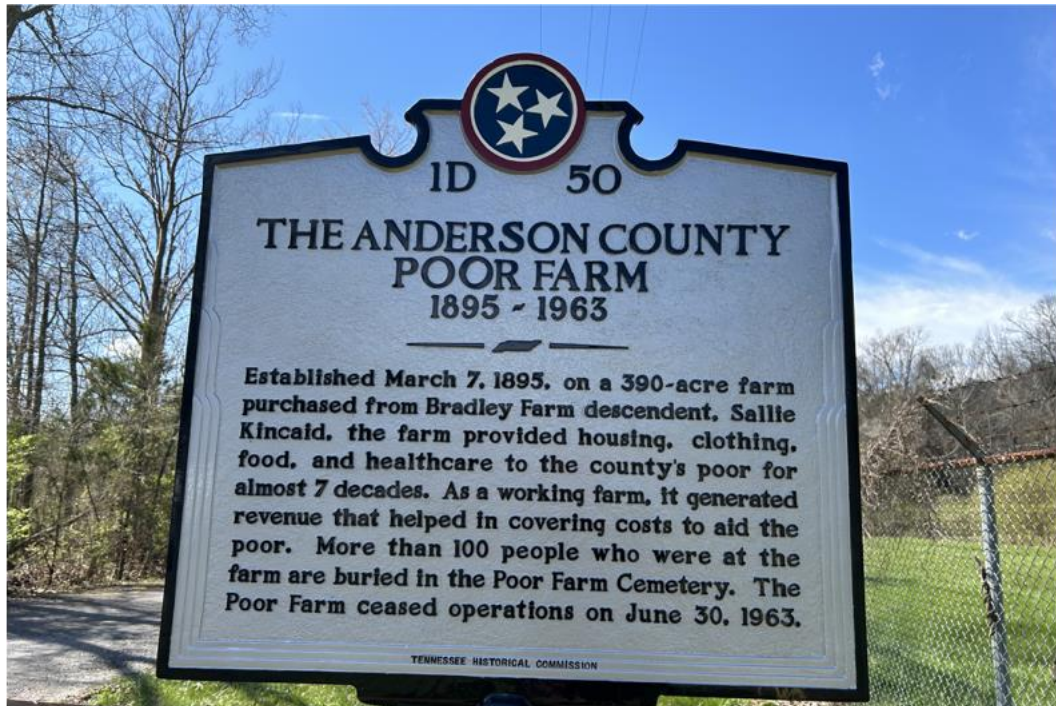
The Poor Farm Cemetery is located on a part of the original farm that was purchased by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the early 1960's for the impoundment of Melton Hill Lake. The deed mentions the construction of an access road to be built by TVA to the cemetery. No footprint of that road is presently visible. A record for the roads construction has not been discovered. This same piece of land was annexed by the City of Oak Ridge, year unknown.

The term inmate used to refer to the residents of the poor farm sounds most harsh. It is however the term used throughout the court records, census records, death certificates and in news articles. The Poor Farm was officially closed June 30, 1963. Care for the county's poor has evolved over the years. Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, subsidized housing, health departments, child and family services, nursing homes and other county, state and federal agencies have taken over that role.

Thanks Leo, for that excellent history of Anderson County Poor Farm. As you pointed out the site is within the city limits of Oak Ridge as those limits cross over the Clinch River/Melton Hill Lake at that portion of land.

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Anderson County Poor Farm Historical Marker