

**VALLEY VIEW ADVISORY COMMITTEE
AGENDA
TUESDAY, JULY 20, 2021
2:30 P.M.**

**COMMITTEE MEETING TO BE HELD IN-PERSON IN THE LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER.
LIVESTREAMING WILL BE AVAILABLE – PLEASE SEE COUNTY WEBSITE:
WWW.ORANGECOUNTYGOV.COM THEN THE LEGISLATIVE CALENDAR FOR THE LINK**

VALLEY VIEW ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS: James D. O'Donnell, Chair
Michael Amo, Michael D. Paduch, D. Bloomer, Laurence LaDue, Eric Ruscher, Rosemary Kukys

- I. LAURENCE LADUE, COMMISSIONER, VALLEY VIEW CENTER
DONNA STRECKER, DIRECTOR OF FINANCE, VALLEY VIEW CENTER
CHRISTOPHER ERICSON, DEPUTY COMMISSIONER, HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

**DISCUSSION: POSSIBLE USES FOR THE PARRY BUILDING AT
VALLEYVIEW**

- II. ERIC RUSCHER, DIRECTOR, REAL PROPERTY TAX SERVICE**

REAL PROPERTY UPDATE

- III. JOHANNA PORR, HISTORIAN**

PRESENTATION: "HISTORY OF THE COUNTY HOUSE"

History of the County House

From a County Poorhouse to the
Valley View Center for Nursing Care and Rehabilitation
Orange County, New York
1829-2021

By Johanna Porr Yaun, Orange County Historian

The Valley View Center for Nursing Care and Rehabilitation traces its long history through several institutional incarnations that have their origins in the 1824 Poorhouse Act. The act ensured that each county in New York State would build a local facility to care for three categories of poor: the able-bodied, the helpless (disabled or aged), and orphaned children of the community who would otherwise be destitute. The role of the county government and the mission of the institution have shifted over the decades to reflect larger cultural changes and to best suit our own community's needs. In modern times, the facility is no longer a home for the poor or orphaned, but instead is solely focused on caring for the elderly.

Government oversight of almshouses, through poor laws, was decentralized in the early period of United States history. Harkening back to English laws that originated in the 17th century, they often included provisions for relief only to individuals who could claim direct ties to a local community or neighborhood church. Because of this deep-rooted cultural perception of poverty being a local issue, state and even county governments were at first reluctant to get involved in regulating facilities and treatment. This resulted in towns and villages operating poorhouses in a wide range of ways. Some communities relied on church leaders to provide for the needy through the charity of their parishioners, while some local governments set aside a portion of local taxes to cover the expenses of housing and feeding the poor. Some communities had a separate orphanage.

Although the financial structures of these institutions and quality of facilities differed greatly, the majority of them required able-bodied men, women, and older children to earn their keep. This helped to cover expenses such as housing the disabled and aged members of the institution, hiring doctors to treat the ill, and paying for undertakers to bury the dead. Individuals who could work were rented out as farm laborers or domestic staff, and the Poor Master would collect their wages to fund the facility.

The variations in care that are evident in early Orange County are indicative of the inconsistencies that existed on a broader level. The community surrounding Newburgh, for instance, had managed a poorhouse and pauper's cemetery of their own, which predated the Revolutionary War. It was located just outside the northern border of the village. Some communities provided for the poor with temporary housing that was rented on an as-needed basis. Smaller hamlets relied on the churches to offer sanctuary for those in need.

Senator Josiah Quincy of Massachusetts published a report in 1821 that exposed the abuses taking place within the system in his state. Complaints included inconsistent care being provided to the

impoverished, the endangerment of children, and corrupt practices such as auctioning off able-bodied paupers to be unpaid laborers – their wages confiscated by the overseers, thus trapping them in a lifelong cycle of poverty and dependency. His report revealed the need for a structural overhaul of policies and a need to create a method of oversight for institutions of this kind. Ultimately, it resulted in many reforms.

Directly inspired by the Quincy Report, New York's Secretary of State, John Van Ness Yates, set out to study the issue and to compile data that could be used to inform public policy reforms. In addition to similar problems of inconsistent care and the confiscation of wages from the able-bodied residents, his 1823 report also revealed that children in the almshouses were not receiving proper education. In many cases, children would be rented to bidders who would pledge to provide them with basic shelter and nourishment until they were of a self-supporting age. Many children were lost to this system, rented far from home and unable to find their way back to family members who were left behind.

As a result of the Yates Report, the New York State Legislature passed a law on November 27, 1824 which mandated that each county in New York erect a county house to care for the poor and disabled from their local municipalities. Many states in the nation passed laws *allowing* for county houses, but New York was the only state to pass a *mandate* into law. Orange County officials met in 1829 to establish a committee to purchase 200 acres of land suitable for this purpose. In January of 1830, the initial 129 acres were purchased from a lawyer, William Thompson of Goshen, for \$3,225. By 1835, all but four counties in New York State had erected poorhouses in compliance with the new law.

In Orange County, five superintendents were appointed as overseers. (After 1857, the site was managed by one elected superintendent.) An eight-page booklet titled "Rules, Regulations and By-laws, for the Government and Good Order of the Poorhouse of the County of Orange" was published in 1831, which defined the proper behavior and duties of the Keeper and Assistant. The Keeper was expected to maintain the finances and establish order through disciplinary measures. The Assistant's job was to ensure that the facility was clean, that regular meals were provided, and to manage burials in the on-site bog land.

Around 1837, a portion of the land was made into a work farm for the residents to plant crops. For the next several decades, stocking and seeding the land would continue to be a documented expense for the institution. Over the years, additions would be made to the house and property, including a large workroom which doubled as a kitchen, which was added in the 1830s. In the 1840s, famed landscape architect and Orange County native Andrew Jackson Downing was commissioned to design a psychiatric facility known as the Utica Lunatic Asylum, to house individuals who were suffering with mental illness. Orange County sent the patients who were difficult to care for to that institution, located upstate.

There was debate periodically in Orange County over whether the County House should be dissolved in favor of sending those with the most severe needs to statewide facilities. For budgetary and humanitarian reasons, there were also many who believed that the responsibility of caring for the poor should revert to the local level. Twenty years after the system had been created, Orange County was averaging 200 people in the poorhouse at any given time. Providing for them cost

taxpayers around a total of \$20,000 per year – equivalent to nearly \$700,000 today. In 1847 the Orange County Board of Supervisors recommended that individual towns debate the issue and in 1853, the community of Newburgh formally withdrew from the county system. A poorhouse, later called the City and Town Home, was erected on the west side of Muchattos Lake in Newburgh, where it continued to operate until 1946.

Despite these discussions, the remainder of local governments in Orange County chose to stay with the county system. A superintendent named G.W. Oliver, who was hired in 1849, ushered in reforms, including the erection of a separate two-story stone building in Goshen for the purpose of housing patients with mental illness. They copied from the philosophy that A.J. Downing had espoused in Utica, providing windows for light and ventilation. Additionally, patients were given space to roam the halls and gardens. This was considerably more humane treatment than the general practice of confining patients with little or no restraint. By 1859, all Orange County patients were removed from the Utica facility to occupy the new building.

At the end of 1860, the superintendent, H.M Hopkins, reported that the County House was supporting 345 individuals on site and another 1,827 were receiving relief payments. After the reforms of the previous decade, they had managed to assist more paupers and provide a facility to mentally ill residents, while reducing the overall cost to taxpayers to \$16,000. They noted that the budget was tightened in part by renegotiating with local merchants who were providing supplies and services with a wide variation in rate. For instance, most communities were providing funds for those in need of temporary relief to purchase coal at \$10 a load, whereas in Goshen, merchants were inflating the cost ten-fold for the county invoices.

There were also medical expenses associated with operating the County House, as the assembly of a large number of people made the spread of disease a risk. In 1863, Dr. J.H. Thompson was employed for the purpose of vaccinating the overcrowded residents against an outbreak of smallpox. Plans were made to erect a new building to reduce overcrowding, but by the time it was completed in 1866, the Civil War was over and the population of the poorhouse fell to 124. It was decided to use the new space to segregate the sleeping quarters, separating the black and white residents.

The gruesome death toll of the Civil War led to major changes in funerary and burial standards throughout the country, which influenced local practices. Until that era, those who died at the County House were buried in a bog meadow without headstones. But during the war, it was decided to reinter the remains to a more formal cemetery plot and the bog land was reclaimed for farming. Later a second cemetery was established, so today, there are two locations with marked cemeteries where hundreds of former residents are buried.

Trends in the way that the poor and unwell were cared for shifted frequently. In the post-Civil War period, there was a general trend away from treating all categories of residents in the same way. Once again, due to overcrowding, residents with mental illness were sent away to larger facilities: in 1872 for instance, nine individuals were residing at the Hudson Valley Asylum in Poughkeepsie, five at the State Asylum in Utica, and 10 at the Willard Asylum in Ovid. Another two dozen individuals remained in the facilities in Goshen. In 1875 it was decided to enlarge the mental health

facility to bring as many of these patients back to Goshen once again, this time to put them to work on the farm.

The County House name was dropped in favor of calling the facility the County Farm. The update reflected the larger sense of the mission changing from a place for support to be doled out in the form of temporary relief to one of providing training for residents. This is also reflected in policies regarding the treatment of children. In 1875 the New York State Legislature dictated that “pauper and destitute children” should be transferred to institutions (often religious organizations) for education and care. Sometimes this took the form of sending Catholic children to Port Jervis to live with the Sisters of Charity and the Protestant children a little further to the Susquehanna Valley Home in Binghamton. Other times it entailed contracting the children’s fate out to the Children’s Aid Society, which would put them on the infamous “orphan trains” to Midwest farms. This earliest form of foster care involved children being given away at a variety of train stops. As can be imagined, this system was fraught with tragedy for many of these children who were separated from relatives and cultural identities, and sometimes were even unable to remember their birth names. There were some positive outcomes for those who ended up in loving homes and the movement led to the development of local foster care programs, but nevertheless, many local children departed from Orange County in this era and never returned.

As a result of the broadly experienced poverty of the depression of the 1930s, the Federal government began to carve out larger influence over poverty policies. Legislation such as the Social Security Act created a system in which the elderly people were eligible for entitlement payments based on their prior contributions to society. And on the flipside, women and children were able to apply for payments through “means-tested” programs such as Aid to Dependent Children. The grants associated with these New Deal programs were so enticing, it is said that “the American people hitched three wild horses, federal, state and local governments...to the same wagon.” There was a trend to support individuals without housing them in an institution, similar to the Outdoor Relief programs that were more common before the Revolutionary War, but with a lot more standardization of eligibility than ever before.

This new form of top down “welfare relief” sent a shockwave through the system. In the 1960s, it was clear that the competing priorities of the local versus the national levels were causing many people to fall between the cracks. The War on Poverty, initiated by President John F. Kennedy and signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, led to a flip in the system with funding from the federal government tied to policy requirements for local recipients. This culminated with a scandal in the City of Newburgh in which the government was stuck between choosing to comply with federal stipulations – which would bankrupt the city finances – or refusing federal funds in order to continue to manage their own welfare system. They chose the latter, instituting tighter rules for those on the welfare rolls. It led to NBC producing an hour-long exposé called *The Battle of Newburgh*, which aired in 1962. Criticism from Gov. Nelson Rockefeller and state injunctions followed and the system was dissolved in favor of reconstituting the welfare system solely under Orange County’s management. This was to be organized from the new Welfare Office located on the grounds of the old County House in Goshen.

The last building designed for the purpose of supporting a poorhouse system was erected in 1936 and the original buildings went out of use for that purpose by the 1970s. The many functions that

the County House served in the previous decades, such as welfare relief, temporary housing, subsistence farm, orphanage, and mental health facility, were separated and outsourced to a variety of government offices and non-profits. However, the function of providing care for the aged persisted. In 1979, the Orange County Residential Health Care Facility opened with the intent of providing senior housing and nursing care. Since the early 1990s, the facility has been known as the Valley View Center for Nursing Care and Rehabilitation.

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