

History of the Licking County Infirmary (by Bill Markley)

The Licking County Infirmary was established to help people who were impoverished, homeless or otherwise in great need. Originally called the Poor House, it became a permanent home for some residents and a temporary one for others. Under the authority of the County Commissioners, its first Board of Directors began meeting in Granville on November 21, 1838. The Board appointed Wait Wright as its first president and Truman B. French as the first superintendent. Wright, originally from Vermont, was a successful Licking County farmer. French was born in New York and had been a businessman in Johnstown. He initially received a salary of \$500 per year for overseeing daily operations at the Poor House. Typically in subsequent years, wives of superintendents were also employed as “matrons.”

In November and December 1838 the Board purchased necessities for paupers, including food, tableware, kitchenware, furniture, bedding, clothing, sewing supplies and tools. According to the Poor House Journal, the first building existed by December 11, 1838. It was located in Union Township and built of logs. The first recorded pauper residents arrived there from Hopewell and Granville Townships on December 12, 1838. Many of the early “inmates” of the Poor House were crippled or mentally ill. Some suffered from consumption, which was the latter stage of tuberculosis. Prostitutes and other women who were unmarried and pregnant were also welcomed. By its first anniversary, the Poor House contained approximately 13 inmates. The Board met monthly and examined the condition of the inmates and the records of the Superintendent. The Board also occasionally paid private households and businesses in the county to help care for other paupers outside of the Poor House.

In the early years, craftsmen and women living nearby were hired to perform services such as blacksmithing, weaving and shoemaking. Others were hired to transport paupers from throughout the county to their new home. Dr. E. F. Bryant was paid regularly for medical services. By 1841, a farm was created near the Poor House to provide some self-sufficiency, and men living nearby were hired as farmhands. They grew wheat, corn, hay, oats and potatoes, tended gardens and fruit trees, and raised cattle, sheep and hogs. The inmates were also furnished with tea and coffee, and cider was regularly purchased for them or made on the farm in autumn. Some inmates worked at the Infirmary, either on the farm or indoors. At least one female inmate was hired as an assistant to the Infirmary matron, and in 1849 a building was constructed “for spinning and weaving.” According to Hill’s History of Licking County, Ohio, several other outbuildings were built, including a “shoe shop, bake house, wash house, store house, slaughter house, winter and spring milk houses, smoke house, ice house, wood house, hog houses, stables, barns, etc.”

The population of mentally ill and “ordinary” paupers at the Poor House increased within a few years of its founding. In 1841 the Board “gave directions for erecting three cells in the basement,” and a cistern was also built. In approximately 1842 a new stone building was constructed for the mentally ill, and it appears that another stone building was erected in 1844 for additional accommodations. In May 1845, the institution housed 42 paupers, including 13 insane and 3 idiotic (at the time, the term “idiot” meant a person who was severely mentally disabled). Superintendent William Beers reported in the same year that “the insane paupers have increased faster in proportion than... ordinary paupers.”

During the first few years, the Board reported regularly that the paupers were “well and in good condition,” or “in tolerable good health.” At the same time nature made life precarious. In June 1846, Superintendent Beers wrote, “The past season remarkable for its vicissitudes and extremes of every kind has been one of affliction to many sections of the county...[I]t may be seen that Pauperism has increased the past year more than 33 percent. The wheat

crop was cut off with the frost the last year....” Still, some progress was made on the farm. A new house for hogs was built, and “[w]e have also made other permanent improvements. We have cleared fenced and planted twelve acres of new ground.” In June 1847 Beers wrote, “we have enjoyed an unusual degree of health throughout the entire institution while sickness and Death has had its victims on every side of us.” In 1848, though, the new superintendent G. W. Glick wrote that he was “very unhappy to say we have been unusually visited by sickness and death at the close of this last year throughout the institution.” In 1849 Glick reported that, while pauperism had increased, the health of the inmates had improved. By 1850 the number of paupers in Licking County had decreased. From that year onwards, while the Poor House still housed and received “ordinary” paupers, it was referred to as the “Infirmery.”

In the 1850’s the Infirmery arranged for local businesses to regularly furnish groceries and hardware and to provide services such as carding of wool. In 1853 the Infirmery housed 101 persons, of whom 14 were insane and 8 idiotic. Three years later, Dr. E. Sennit was required “to visit the Institution at least once each week and as much oftener as may be necessary, and furnish all necessary medicines.”

In 1862 the original log residence was replaced by a brick structure, in which the superintendent and his family shared living quarters with inmates. The Infirmery farm grew to approximately 220 acres after the Civil War. According to the 1866 annual report, “[t]here has been produced on the farm and consumed 1600 bushels of corn, 400 bushels of wheat, 700 bushels of potatoes, 7902 pounds of pork....” The Board also emphasized that year that “we would fail to do our duty and justice to our worthy superintendent and matron Mr. G. W. Glick and wife did we not give our hearty approval of the efficient and satisfactory manner in which they have each in their respective capacities discharged their duties.” Two years later the amount of crops and pork produced on the farm had increased, and local women were paid as schoolteachers for the inmates.

The Board reported regularly to the Licking County Commissioners, who reviewed the expenditures and condition of the Infirmery. In 1864 the Commissioners reported that:

“...the institution is well kept, the apartments of the building clean and comfortable, and the inmates are well provided for and their condition as good as could be expected, considering that many are afflicted and infirm from age and so forth. The buildings are in good condition and the farm is well managed and in a good state of cultivation and improvement.”

By 1888 the self-sufficiency of the Infirmery seems to have increased. The Board wrote, “our expenses are considerably less when compared with former years.” And the County Commissioners stated:

“The health of the inmates is very good having but very few deaths.... We feel satisfied that the inmates are well cared for and are peaceable and contented with but few exceptions.”

Additions were made to the main Infirmery residence. Small bedrooms for the inmates and separate dining halls for males and females were created. The separate stone residence for the mentally ill was also maintained. In 1869, a fire broke out there, and ten inmates who were trapped in their cells were killed, despite the efforts of others to assist them.

Throughout the 1890’s the Infirmery administrators tried different ways of tackling sanitation problems with varying degrees of success. Typhoid fever broke out in Union Township in 1897, and according to a State Board of Health investigator the Infirmery at the time “was in

excellent sanitary condition," except for one building where the toilet facilities were outdated and sewage disposal was inadequate. The Board and the Commissioners agreed to fix these problems and to build a water tower for better sanitation and fire safety. Telephone service, electricity and gas heating were also added during the next few decades, plumbing was repaired, hospital facilities were created, a nurse was hired, and a new barn was built. The inmate population continued to hover around 100.

In 1918, the established Infirmary Fund was exhausted "due to the unforeseen loss of that portion of the Liquor License Fee." The Commissioners then borrowed \$3,000 to pay outstanding bills and meet further expenses, and sold bonds to generate revenue. From 1919 the Infirmary was often called the County Home.

By the 1920's, county residents who were severely mentally ill tended to be taken to institutions such as the Columbus State Hospital rather than the County Home, and tuberculosis patients went to tuberculosis sanitariums. Private agencies such as the Red Cross assisted the Home with transportation. During the same period farm equipment and a truck were purchased, major building repairs were made, and the Home leased farmland and sold excess hay, sheep, wool and lard to acquire additional revenue.

Throughout the 1930's the county continued to pay private households and businesses to care for paupers, and also provided direct "home relief" to poor households. Ministers were also employed by the Home to conduct regular religious services and funerals at the institution. From the 1940's through the 1960's, farm equipment was upgraded and major repairs were made to Infirmary buildings. Unfortunately a barn, livestock, crops and equipment were destroyed by fire in 1951.

In 1967 the Commissioners unanimously voted that Superintendent Homer Comisford should prepare to move County Home residents and operations to the Licking County Tuberculosis Sanitarium building. The move finally occurred in 1969. Eventually other government agencies took over functions that had been performed by the old institution. By the 1990's the main residential building of the old Infirmary had seriously deteriorated. It was demolished in 1997, although some of the other buildings remain. Currently Infirmary Mound Park occupies the site.

Inmates experienced a wide range of fates from 1838 to 1969. Some lived for several years at the Infirmary and died there. One "sick tramp" died a few months after he was admitted in 1887. Babies were born there from 1840 onwards. Several child inmates were eventually moved to orphanages, and some were sent to work for farmers or other employers. Some adult inmates were discharged for a variety of reasons, and a few ran away. Occasionally an inmate would be taken to live with family members. Others married and set up new homes. According to an 1845 Journal entry, one mentally ill woman experienced a remarkable recovery: this "old case of insanity that was returned from the Lunatic Asylum in March 1840 as incurable has by steady and persevering attention recovered and returned to her family." The Infirmary Register includes entries which were meant to describe the general habits of the individual inmates, such as "moral," "immoral," "full of fun," "temperate," "steady," etc. While most inmates were probably born in Licking County, some were born overseas, especially Germany and Ireland. An example of an inmate during the later period of the institution was Tony Angelo, who was born in Italy and admitted to the County Home in 1950 at the age of 74. He had resided earlier in Newark, became destitute and sick, and had no living relatives in the United States. His habits at the Infirmary were described as "good," and he died there in 1954. While the bodies of some deceased inmates were taken by relatives or friends and buried in private cemeteries, approximately 260 others were buried on the Infirmary grounds.

Sources

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