

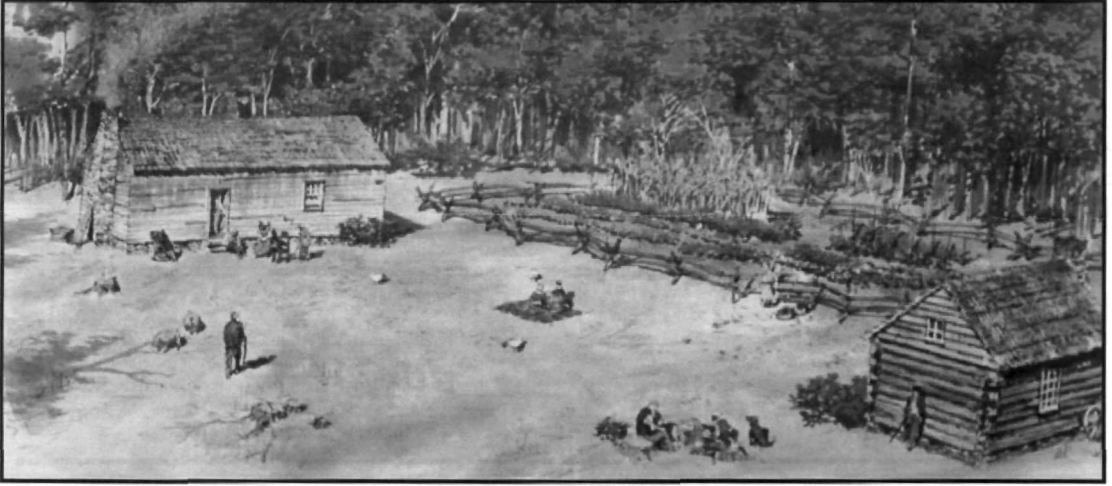
# Prince William Forest Park

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

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## The Poor House - 1794-1927



In 1793, two local landowners constructed a "poorhouse" that was to be "a framed House Sixteen Feet Square with a Stone or Brick Chimney Weather Boarded & Covered with Shingles." It would serve Prince William County from 1794 - 1927. Drawing courtesy: The Louis Berger Group, Inc.

### Overview

In 1794, the Prince William County Poor House began operating in what is now the northwest corner of Prince William Forest Park. The county's poorest White and African American residents were housed there until 1927. Though the age of poor houses has long passed, the problem of an unwanted and misunderstood homeless population is as alive as ever. Historical records and recent National Park Service (NPS) archeological digs at the site shed some light on the treatment of the poor and mentally infirmed in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries.

### A Revolutionary Idea

When the American Revolution ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1783, aid for the poor differed in varying states. In Virginia, which recognized the Anglican Church as its official church, Anglican parishes distributed relief. In 1785, with the enactment of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, Virginia's parishes lost this responsibility as the state ceased recognizing an official church. Instead, the poor became charges of county governments.

Like parishes, counties provided cash or in-kind payments to poor people living in their homes (a type of aid known as "outdoor relief") and some supported almshouses or poorhouses. The resulting poorhouses, which were a form of "indoor relief," became more common in Virginia and in other states during the 1790s and early 1800s. Prince William's County's poorhouse was one of the first ten built by a Virginia county government.

Poorhouses were intended to be Spartan and uncomfortable; living conditions were supposed to convince paupers that only through hard work would they escape the atmosphere of penury. However, overseers were late to realize that few inmates were capable of hard work. During the nineteenth century, almshouses also served as places to which masters sometimes emancipated elderly or disabled enslaved laborers and gave counties the responsibility for their upkeep. These former slaves were representative of the typical poorhouse inmate. As this 1794 list of residents shows, most were simply aged or physically or mentally incapable of working and not idle loafers.

*William Miliner deaf and a very old man  
James Wilky a very deaf old man  
William Martin deaf and blind  
Celia Wilkinson very infirm  
Ann Lunceford and Child . . .  
Arrabelle Baze a blind troublesome old Woman  
Elizabeth Wood an insane Woman  
Elisabeth Doughty to Assist in Washing*

### Creating The Poor

Subsistence agriculture dominated the local economy between the 1790s and 1930s. Some residents owned farms, while others worked as tenant farmers or enslaved laborers before the Civil War, or as sharecroppers afterwards. Large tobacco plantations were established during the early 1700s, but by the end of the century most local planters became subsistence farmers, replacing soil exhausting tobacco with crops requiring fewer nutrients, such as corn (maize) and wheat. Even with the shift from tobacco to other crops, agriculture did not bring economic growth. Between 1790 and 1860, the county's population fell from 11,615 to 8,565, while the state's population grew by nearly 54%. Many people emigrated to new western states and territories. Those who remained supplemented their incomes by selling fish from the Potomac or through operating blacksmith shops or small dry-goods stores.

The Civil War significantly affected Prince William County. Two major battles occurred near Manassas in 1861 and 1862, and a primary route between the capitals of Richmond and Washington passed through the county. High inflation devastated the local economy; extensive troop movements destroyed livestock and crops.

In the early twentieth century, the county's population remained low; census-takers found only 13,951 residents in 1930. Federal impressions of local poverty were contributing factors in the 1935 creation of Chopawamsic Recreational Demonstration Area by the Resettlement Administration. During the final years that the poorhouse operated near Independent Hill, its neighbors worked on their own small farms and supplemented their incomes through jobs at local military bases.

## Poor House Residents

In some areas of the United States, nineteenth century poorhouses housed all sorts of people, from young orphans to the destitute elderly. However, county overseers of the poor distributed cash or in-kind payments to approved able-bodied poor. They remained in their communities and did not live at the poorhouse. The amount of the allowances varied over time. In 1820, payments averaged \$11.40 per year, while in 1860 they were \$16.22, rising to \$47.42 in 1874. In 1912, individuals on the county's poor list each received about \$34.28 per year. Taxes and, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, timber sales, funded these welfare programs.

## Poor House Life

While it always had many more white residents than African-Americans, the poorhouse was racially integrated. However, integration does not imply equality. Records from before the Civil War rarely provided African-American residents the small dignity of listing their surnames. African-American residents were almost always physically or mentally disabled. What happened at the poorhouse during the war that freed the slaves is a mystery; none of its records from 1861 to 1874 survive.

## The Poor House Legacy

Today, poorhouses built to coerce the able, indigent poor into working are gone. In Virginia, a system of district nursing homes for chronically ill poor people superseded its almshouses. Several programs created as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal response to the Great Depression of the 1930s, such as Social Security and Medicare, supported (and continue to support) people with low incomes in ways similar to nineteenth-century 'outdoor relief' programs.

In the 1910s, the Virginia legislature considered several bills to consolidate county almshouses into district homes for the indigent elderly. At that time, most county poorhouses had fewer than ten residents and were in remote locations. Their superintendents were poorly trained and did not provide the needed level of medical care. Legislators believed that merging poorhouses into regional facilities would save local governments money by brining a larger number of needy to one location with a higher quality of care than counties could provide individually. The legislature enacted a law allowing consolidation in 1918.

Prince William County was one of five counties that merged their poorhouses to create the first district home. Together with Culpeper, Fairfax, and Fauquier Counties, and the city of Alexandria, it opened a new residential facility - today known as Birmingham Green - in Manassas on 28 January 1927. After the opening of the district home, Prince William County sold its poorhouse property of 296 acres for \$2,000.00.



A NPS Archeological Dig exposed the poor house chimney. Photo courtesy: NPS.

Most individuals who lived at the county poorhouse were elderly or disabled women without the means (or close family) to support themselves. Individuals applied to the overseers of the poor for admission and only gained entry to the poorhouse if they were deemed to be "worthy poor," people not responsible for their poverty and incapable of improving their own life. Children sometimes lived at the poorhouse for short periods, but the overseers usually apprenticed them to a farmer or tradesman. Most nineteenth-century welfare officials opposed allowing children to live in almshouses and be exposed to the 'idleness' of paupers.

Able inmates, together with a few hired farmhands, grew most of the food for poorhouse residents. However, most residents were unable to work due to age and illness; of the 17 residents listed in an 1858 annual report to the state's Auditor of Public Accounts, only four were healthy enough to work.

Archaeological excavations in 2001 found harmonica fragments and pieces of tobacco pipes in the ruins of the poorhouse, suggesting that smoking and music were leisure activities for some poorhouse residents. Medical care came through a contracted local doctor.

By the early twentieth century, healthcare professionals viewed poorhouses as dumping grounds for the unwanted elderly, "characterized by poverty, disease, and filth. At least one description of the Poor House survives, written in 1926 by a welfare reformer:

*Poor farm located 13 miles south of Manassas, way back on poor, cutover land, off any traveled road, in a woods. Very few know that such a place exists. The poorhouse is an old frame shack, one story, about 14 x 84 with 6 rooms, some without doors, windows boarded up. Fertilizer sacks filled with straw and old buggy cushions for mattresses on broke-down beds. Bed covers are rags— parts of old blankets or quilts, very filthy. An old man, clothes ragged and filthy, asleep on a pile of dirty rags, in a vile room swarming with flies and vermin. Poor and insufficient food; poor, filthy clothing; no music, amusement or religious services. No medical attention whatever; no screens, the place reeking with bedbugs and body lice. Well water, filthy outside privies used by both sexes, no sewerage, slop and garbage just thrown through the doors. Contaminating diseased inmates use same bedrooms and toilets as do other inmates, and their clothes go into a common wash. Men's and women's bedrooms adjoin.*

When poorhouse residents died, the county buried them in the poorhouse's cemetery. A 1996 survey found nearly 30 graves, though only 13 are marked with headstones or footstones. The county also provided coffins for dead poor people not resident at the poorhouse. An onsite superintendent managed the poorhouse; research shows that at least one superintendent, John J. Carter (1865-1928), is buried within today's park boundary. The poor house cemetery is one of over 45 cemeteries in Prince William Forest Park. The cemetery and foundations of the Prince William County poor house are protected by federal law. Removing of any artifacts or disturbing the site is punishable with a fine of up to \$5,000.00