

The treatment of Halifax's poor house dead during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

By

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Abstract

The treatment of Halifax's poor house dead during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

by Cynthia Simpson

*Rattle his bones over the stones,
He's only a pauper who nobody owns¹*

Suggesting a cold, lonely death, the above verse begs the question of whether or not care and respect were bestowed upon a deceased poor house inmate by their caretakers. Upon their death, fortunate inmates were collected by their kin; for those less fortunate, their remains were entrusted into the hands of the poor house management, whose mortuary practices ranged from terse and impassive to respectful of one's final wishes. Based primarily on archival material, this thesis will examine how the dead of Halifax's poor houses were handled during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Placed in context, the research suggests adequate treatment of poor house inmates by those individuals responsible for their care, given the resources and facilities at their disposal. By detailing the mortuary treatment given to the poor house inmates, attention is offered to a segment of Nova Scotia's population frequently overlooked, now and in the past.

23 August 2011

¹ Thomas Laqueur, "Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals," *Representations* 1 (1983): 122.

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1 ~ Introduction

The poor have always been treated with less extravagance than the wealthy, and with death came no exceptions. By the mid-eighteenth century, pauper funerals “became occasions both terrifying to contemplate oneself and profoundly degrading to one’s survivors,”¹ as they “signified abject poverty, carried the lowly taint of the workhouse and suggested insufficient grief...”² Given that many poor house inmates did not have a stable support system in place to care for them in life, it is unlikely, upon their death, that many inmates were claimed by their kin. As a result, their remains were left in the hands of poor house management, to dispose of them as they wished. Though scant records exist describing how the death of a Halifax poor house inmate was handled, by highlighting the interplay between international trends and local conditions, elements of its mortuary practices can be brought to light.

Before such social programs as unemployment insurance, old age security, and family allowance were implemented in the twentieth century, “a life marred by drink, poverty and itinerancy was often a ticket to the poorhouse in late 19th century Canada.”³ Victorian Halifax held true to this image, sending many a convict to serve their punishment in either the prison or the poor house. As few alternatives were available during this period except institutionalization, the poor house served as a symbol of refuge

¹ Laqueur 109.

² Julie-Marie Strange, “Only a Pauper Whom Nobody Owns: Reassessing the Pauper Grave c. 1880-1914,” *Past & Present* 178 (2003): 148.

³ David Hood, *Down But Not Out: Community and the Upper Streets in Halifax: 1890-1914* (Black Point, NS: Fernwood, 2010) 2.

for those living dangerously on society's margins, all the while remaining "feared and shunned by the honest working poor."⁴

Histories written of the City of Halifax identify three poor houses: the first located on Spring Garden Road established in the 1750s, a second poor house erected at the corner of South and Robie Street in 1869, and a third poor house constructed in 1886 over the ruins of the second poor house, which burned to the ground in 1882.⁵ Grounded in historical archaeology, this research offers an analysis of the ways in which death was dealt with in the poor house. It will explore, among other things, what materials and resources were available to the Halifax poor houses when burying the dead, what funerary practices were performed, where these individuals were buried, and to what extent these cemeteries accurately represent or acknowledge the individuals buried there. By doing so, this research will add much-needed perspective on the treatment of the dead and burial of the residents of the poor house.

Traditionally, marginalized social groups have been neglected from the historical record, and the poor are no exception. As Hood wrote, "nowhere in Canada has the history of extreme poverty received much attention."⁶ As with many institutions centered on the poor, the elderly, the disabled, the criminal, and the drunkard, discussion surrounding such places was and to some extent, remains minimal. Sadly, the archival record reflects this attitude as the historically voiceless, marginalized and subordinate social groups have left very little mark of their existence.

⁴ Judith Fingard, *The Dark Side of Life in Victorian Halifax* (Porters Lake, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1989) 55.

⁵ Senior Scribes of Nova Scotia, *Poverty, Poor Houses, and Private Philanthropy*, ed. Susan Lucy. (Halifax: Publishing Section, Communications Nova Scotia) 111-118.

⁶ Hood 2.

The inmates of the Halifax poor houses have long since passed; their existence left to linger within the aged, creased pages of historical documents, recorded almost two centuries ago by those holding the reins of power and authority. Coupled with this reality, as well as the fact that charity was often an act conducted in private and not recorded, the difficulties in researching the poor are challenging, to say the least. As a result, in order to recount the tale of a death within the poor house, it is necessary to contextualize the historical records written by those in authority, recognizing the potential biases that may lie within. By weeding through and interpreting those records, the voices of the poor house inmates may have the opportunity to articulate their experiences. As Hodder notes, “interpretation is translation. It involves the archaeologist acting as interpreter between past and present, between different perspectives on the past, and between the specific and the general.”⁷

Understanding the social conditions of the poor in Nova Scotia can offer insight into the manner in which they were treated in death since the ways in which a culture disposes their dead is a visible expression of that culture’s values and belief system toward the dead and the living.⁸ Histories of Halifax, social conditions of the poor, Poor Law administration and poor relief have been written in abundance over the centuries and have proven most useful in setting the stage for this analysis.⁹ However, with the

⁷ Ian Hodder, “Interpretive Archaeology and Its Role,” *American Antiquity* 56.1 (1991): 15.

⁸ Mike Parker Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1999) 141.

⁹ Dr. T. B. Atkins, *History of Halifax City*, 2nd edition. (Belleville, ON: Mika, 1973); Fingard, *The Dark Side*; Marguerite H. L. Grant, “Historical Sketches of Old Hospitals and Alms Houses in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1749 to 1859,” *The Nova Scotia Medical Bulletin* 17(1938); David Hood, *Down But Not Out*; Fred R. MacKinnon, *Reflections: 55 Years in Public Services in Nova Scotia* (Black Point, NS: Fernwood 2004); Allan Everett Marble, *Physicians, Pestilence, and the Poor: A History of Medicine and Social Conditions in Nova Scotia, in 1800-1867* (Oxford, UK: Trafford, 2006); Marble, *Surgeons, Smallpox, and the Poor: A History of Medicine and Social Conditions in Nova Scotia, in 1749-1799* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP,

exception of brief passages, very little has been written regarding the disposition of the poor house dead. Drawing on the tools of social history and historical archaeology, this thesis examines the lives of the poor, and more specifically, their treatment after death.

Works by Allan Marble and David Hood provide a fresh version of such topics, adding detail and accuracy to those accounts written decades past. Multiple works by Marble have been exceptionally useful, given his detailed accounts of medicine and social conditions in Nova Scotia throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰ Perhaps of greatest value to this research, as a secondary source, has come from the collection of writings on the history of institutional care in the province, authored by the Senior Scribes Committee.¹¹ What initially served as an exciting starting point in my research, this publication has offered a substantial amount of insight from start to finish, offering brief, yet informative histories on all 32 poor houses throughout Nova Scotia, as well as information on poor relief efforts from the early days of settlement, onward.

As primary records, minute books recorded by the Commissioners of the Halifax Poor Asylum (1829-1839 and 1840-1860), the Hospital and Poores' Asylum Commissioners (1866-1878); and the Charities Committee (1895-1912) have provided the only specific information regarding the treatment of the poor house dead, and as such, have been invaluable. Though the records only begin in 1829, they have still proven

1993); Kenneth G. Pryke, "Poor Relief and Health Care in Halifax, 1827-1849," *Essays in the History of Canadian Medicine*, eds. Wendy Mitchinson and Janice Dickin McGinnis (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988); Thomas H. Raddall, *Halifax: Warden of the North* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1993); Catherine Saunders, *Social conditions and legislation in Nova Scotia, 1815-1851* (Halifax: Dalhousie, 1949); Senior Scribes of Nova Scotia, *Poverty, Poor Houses, and Private Philanthropy*; Charles H. Thomas, "The Administration of the Poor Law in Nova Scotia, 1749-1937," master's thesis, Dalhousie U, 1938; Peter Twohig, "Colonial Care: Medical Attendance among the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 13 (1996).

¹⁰ Marble, *Physicians*; Marble, *Surgeons*; Hood, *Down But Not Out*.

¹¹ Senior Scribes, *Poverty, Poor Houses, and Private Philanthropy*.

useful. In addition, other primary records such as the Journal of Assembly, Halifax City Charters, Nova Scotia Statutes, Court of General Sessions of the Peace, petitions of relief, township meeting minutes, medical bulletins, and newspaper articles have added depth to my research on social conditions and poor relief in Nova Scotia during the outlined time period.

Unfortunately, some documents that would have assisted substantially in my research were either never recorded or perhaps were simply lost over the years: no minute books prior to 1829 were located, which could have offered a description of what life was like in the poor house from the institution's beginning; no photographs were found of the Spring Garden Road poorhouse (c. 1760 to 1869), nor of the interiors of either South Street poorhouse; architectural drawings were not located for any of the three poor houses, no firsthand accounts written by the inmates themselves were obtained; and disciplinary reports which were to be produced as mandatory records, as stated in the Halifax City Charter of 1907, do not appear anywhere in the listings at the Provincial and Municipal Archives. As such, though some information was gathered on the early days of Halifax's poor houses, most of the information pertinent to my research objective is relevant to the nineteenth and twentieth century institutions.

Though gaps exist in the historical record, it is through piecing together fragmentary evidence from multiple record groups that an investigation into the treatment of the poor house dead can be made. The voices of poor house inmates were most often silent in the historical record; what this research offers is insight into their experiences as

inmates, their final days in the poor house and the disposition of their bodies, something that was considered to be incredibly important in the nineteenth century.¹²

¹² Histories written on institutions of poor relief have rarely incorporated the voice of its patients/inmates. The work of Geoffrey Reaume, *Remembrance of Patients Past: Patient Life at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, 1870-1940* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), provides a history of the Toronto Insane Asylum, incorporating the voices of asylum inmates; thus, providing a primary source of life and death inside the institution.

2 ~ The Beginning of Poor Relief in the New Colony

Before the colony of Halifax was settled in 1749, the population was largely made up of French and native inhabitants, approximately 15,000 in Acadian and 10,000 in Mi'kmaq communities.¹ English settlers were few, 300 at Annapolis Royal and 2,000 at Louisbourg, though the latter consisted mainly of military personnel. Population demographics of the colony were destined to be shaken, when the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle was signed by the French and English on April 18th, 1748, placing Louisbourg back in the hands of the French, as the English slowly made their way down the coast to Chebucto.² Thus, a plan began to evolve; an English fortress was to be established at Chebucto Harbour, bringing to the new colony a large number of persons of English descent.³

In March of 1749, the proposed plan of George Montagu-Dunk, Earl of Halifax and president of the Board of Trade and Plantations, was printed in the *London Gazette*. Written to attract the attention of officers and private men discharged from His Majesty's service after the War of the Austrian Succession, the advertisement proposed the settlement of a new colony, Nova Scotia, offering to provide the necessary provisions and maintain the settlers for a twelve month period at the public's expense.⁴ Thirteen transports, under the command of Colonel Edward Cornwallis, captain general and governor-in-chief of Nova Scotia, left Spithead, England on May 15, 1749 o.s.,

¹ Senior Scribes 13.

² Marble, *Surgeons* 222n.3. The name 'Chebucto' was originally named 'Che-book-took' by the Micmacs, means "at the biggest harbour" and refers to the city of Halifax (Thomas H. Raddall, *Halifax: Warden of the North* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1993) 1).

³ Raddall 16-19.

⁴ Atkins 5; Marble, *Surgeons* 13-14.

embarking on the voyage to Chebucto Harbour.⁵ By July 1, 1749, all 2,547 passengers aboard the transports had arrived, eager to make a fresh start in the new colony. Of these settlers, many were “the poor of London, a rabble of cockneys wholly unfit for a life in the American wilderness, attracted simply by the promise of free victuals. Amongst them were fifty or sixty former officers of the army and navy, unable to resist the generous offers of land, and a few gentlemen volunteers in search of adventure.”⁶

The history of Chebucto Harbour (hereafter referred to as Halifax) lies primarily within the pages of a seafaring and military tale, where ships of war lined the harbour and thousands of soldiers and sailors on leave roamed the upper streets in search of the many brothels, grog shops, and dancing houses which had become a common sight in the town.⁷

The upper street along the base of Citadel Hill between the north and south barracks [was] known as “Knock him Down” Street in consequence of the number of affrays and even murders committed there. No person of any character ventured to reside there, nearly all the buildings being occupied as brothels for the soldiers and sailors. The streets of this part of the town presented continually the disgusting sight of abandoned females of the lowest class in a state of drunkenness, bare headed, without shoes, and in the most filthy and abominable condition.⁸

Halifax became home to a large number of military regiments and naval ships because of its military significance and the efforts of the Board of Trade and Plantations. The troops brought with them many camp followers who were left destitute once these regiments departed for battle or returned to Europe,⁹ and the number of poor in the new

⁵ Marble, *Surgeons* 14.

⁶ Raddall, 20.

⁷ Atkins 158.

⁸ Atkins 158.

⁹ Marble, *Surgeons* 3.

colony increased substantially during the early years of settlement. As Saunders described, “ex-soldiers and war weary people swelled the population of Nova Scotia by many thousands.”¹⁰ In a matter of time, “the moral conditions of the town [Halifax] had become dreadful in the extreme”; the population expanded, the town became increasingly overcrowded, and the cost of living rose as a result of the increase in trade.¹¹ As a consequence, one of the early issues which the colony faced was how to deal with the poor.

Poor relief was dismal, at best. The government’s involvement and responsibility for its impoverished inhabitants prior to 1749 was largely insignificant; welfare remained in the private sector where paupers were left to rely on relatives, neighbors, and parishes for relief.¹² Prior to colonization, the province consisted mainly of Mi’kmaq and Acadian communities, who proved to be self-supporting, caring for those who were not able to care for themselves.¹³ Unfortunately, the “help thy neighbor” attitude held by most Nova Scotians was greatly challenged when the Elizabethan Poor Law, dating back to 1547, was brought to the New World by Cornwallis and his settlers. Whereas native inhabitants of the new colony relied heavily upon their church and community to see to it that no one went without, Cornwallis’ settlers, who were accustomed to the ways of the English Poor Law, “tended to view poverty as a reflection on the worth and character of the person”¹⁴ since it was perceived that poverty was an individual’s responsibility.

¹⁰ Saunders 82.

¹¹ Atkins 158.

¹² Fingard et al 80; Atkins 147, 195; Senior Scribes 31-66.

¹³ Senior Scribes 13.

¹⁴ Senior Scribes 13.

With such a dramatic increase in Nova Scotia's population at its time of settlement and soon after, many settlers became public charges of the provincial government; a responsibility the government was not eager to claim as its own.¹⁵ Though the province had no intention of relinquishing its power to the townships, its reluctance was swayed once the financial burden of poor relief swelled. By 1763, the government conceded that some form of poor relief administration had to be established and gradually began to shift more and more responsibility for the poor unto smaller units of administration; in that year, individual townships were now responsible to care for their own poor.¹⁶ Modeled after the English Poor Law, two Acts were adopted to deal with the province's poor:

These were an Act to enable the Several Townships within this Province, to Maintain their Poor, and an Act to enable the Inhabitants of Townships to assess themselves for the relief of the Poor, both of which received assent on 26 November 1763. The latter act transferred the burden of supporting the poor from the provincial government to the township officer.¹⁷

In the same year that the above mentioned Acts were passed, the first allowance was granted, giving townships the right to hold annual meetings in order to provide support for the poor. During these meetings, assessors and collectors were appointed; the former to assess poor rates on all property, the latter to collect the poor rates and submit them to the Overseers of the Poor. Though the townships were empowered to choose the

¹⁵ Thomas 5-9.

¹⁶ Thomas 9-10.

¹⁷ Marble, *Surgeons* 82.

assessors and collectors, they could only nominate individuals to be Overseers of the Poor; the final decision and appointment rested with the Court of Sessions of the Peace.¹⁸

Ordered in England's Poor Law Act of 1601, "overseers [were] to raise 'weekly or otherwise in every parish by taxation of every inhabitant, parson, vicar and other, and of every occupier of tithes, coal mines, and saleable underwoods in the said parish,' such necessary and sufficient 'sum or sums of money as they shall think fit'."¹⁹ Appointed by the municipal councils for each poor district to manage the funds allocated by the council, the Overseers of the Poor had the responsibility of disbursing monies collected through the poor rates to those less fortunate.²⁰ The role played by the Overseers of the Poor in the relief of the destitute was immense; in fact, "they had the final say in determining who was a fit recipient for public assistance and who was not."²¹

Through these two Acts, the new colony adopted the English Poor Law system which placed responsibility for poor relief in the townships, rather than with the colonial government.²² In effect, these Acts served as the foundation for poor law legislation in Nova Scotia for the next 200 years, until the abolition of the Poor Law in 1958.²³ Yet, in due course, even the townships began to feel the strain of supporting the poor. As a result, townships were further divided into poor districts, each district being responsible for their own poor. Depending on the size of the township, the number of districts varied: "large

¹⁸ Thomas 5-9.

¹⁹ Clarke 28.

²⁰ Thomas 9.

²¹ Timothy J. Lockley, "Public Poor Relief in Buncombe County, North Carolina, 1792-1860," *North Carolina Historical Review* 80(2003): 35.

²² Thomas 8-9.

²³ MacKinnon 64-73.

municipalities like Pictou and Halifax might have as many as 25 to 30 poor districts, each responsible for the administration of its poor relief.”²⁴

Consequently, once poor districts had been established, the next step was to determine to which poor district a pauper belonged since “every person having a settlement in a district [was] entitled to relief from that district”²⁵ and no poor district willfully wanted to expend funds if it was not their responsibility. Residence was undoubtedly one of the most important methods in gaining relief; in the nineteenth century, a residence of five consecutive years was sufficient to establish settlement and warrant relief from the appropriate poor district. Another highly effective method was property ownership, whereby settlement could be gained “by paying one year’s poor or county taxes.”²⁶ Other methods are listed as follows:

An apprentice, who is under twenty-one, gains a settlement if he has served an apprenticeship for two years within the poor district. A hired servant who has served for one year also gains a settlement. Marriage forms another basis. A married woman takes the settlement of her husband, but if he has none she does not lose her own settlement. A legitimate child gains the settlement of the father, if he has any; but if the father has no settlement, the child takes the settlement of the mother, if she has any. An illegitimate child takes the settlement of the mother, and if the mother, by reason of a subsequent marriage, acquires a new settlement, that becomes also the settlement of the child. Any child who has no settlement by parentage takes as settlement the place of his birth. Any former settlement is lost as soon as a new one is acquired within the province, and once lost, the old one never revives.²⁷

²⁴ Senior Scribes 16.

²⁵ Thomas 38.

²⁶ Thomas 38-39.

²⁷ Thomas 39; Clarke 69-71.

In cases where a person did not fit into any of the appointed settlement rules, they became the financial responsibility of the province and were known as the transient poor.²⁸

Under the Poor Law, settlement rules allowed for the ‘warning out’ or ‘removal of’ paupers. The former referred to those paupers moving about from one poor district to another and could be warned out or advised to return to their original settlement. The latter, centered toward those seeking relief in a poor district for which they were not settlers, could be physically removed from said settlement. It was not an uncommon practice, even in the early twentieth century before the Poor Law was abolished, to have “the relief-giving authority purchase a one-way train ticket and place the applicant on the train to return to the place of origin.”²⁹

Unfortunately, the poor law administration held certain initiatives that simply continued the cycle of poverty, including the view that a person receiving public assistance should never be entitled to receive funds higher than the lowest wage being paid in the community. As a result, “the children of the poor ha[d] no knowledge of any condition except poverty and perpetuate[d] it in a continuing cycle.”³⁰ It was in response to the inadequacies of the Poor Law that many inhabitants of the colony perceived, that the various non-governmental, social groups listed above, were established. According to MacKinnon, instead of dealing with the shortfalls of the Poor Law, the people of Halifax spent their energy establishing specific programs, in an attempt to ease the suffering of the poor and destitute.³¹

²⁸ Senior Scribes 20.

²⁹ Senior Scribes 20.

³⁰ MacKinnon 66.

³¹ MacKinnon 66.

Unfortunately, ‘outdoor relief’ or relief with little government involvement was not always a possibility as some communities did not have the resources to support their own poor. In such instances, the poor would be boarded out or sold at public auction, meaning the lowest bidder would be paid a set amount of money from the Overseers of the Poor to take in the individual for a period of a year and use their services as they wished.³² Sadly, abuse featured regularly with such relief methods, and as was often the case, it was relatively impossible for Overseers to monitor paupers who had been discharged into the service of other parties. In Kings County, New Brunswick, following an inquest held on a dead pauper, it was concluded “that the death was due to willful neglect on the part of those who had him in charge last and neglect on the part of the Overseers of the Poor.”³³ Another inquest into the death of a discharged pauper revealed that he had been “kept in an unheated room and had incurred a bruise on his hip and a broken rib sustained as the result of a fall or beating.”³⁴

Though one might anticipate the abuse that often accompanied this type of relief method, such treatment was not confined to the poor. Documented in the 1824 New York Yates³⁵ Report of the Secretary of State on the Relief and Settlement of the Poor, mistreatment of this relief method was two sided:

The poor, when farmed out, or sold, [were] frequently treated with barbarity and neglect by their keepers. The other side was the way the poor sometimes apparently turned the system of auction or sale to their own

³² Senior Scribes 18.

³³ James M. Whalen, “Social Welfare in New Brunswick, 1784-1900,” 2. 10 January 2011 <http://archives.gnb.ca/Irish/Databases/Almshouse/text/en-CA/WelfareNB.pdf>.

³⁴ Whalen, “Social Welfare,” 2.

³⁵ Joan Underhill Hannon, “The Generosity of Antebellum Poor Relief,” *The Journal of Economic History* 44.3 (1984): 813. In 1822, Secretary of State John Yates was requested by the New York State Legislature to prepare a report on the state’s poor relief system. Questionnaires were sent to relief officials in every city and town; 367 towns completed and returned the questionnaire.

advantage. Families bid for the care of their own relatives, and they often put in the low bid because they were willing or able to care for them with very little additional money. In these instances, public funds subsidized a modestly comfortable life for dependent people with their kin.³⁶

Instances of auctioning off the poor to the lowest bidder were not uncommon in Nova Scotia. In 1852, in Lunenburg County, twenty-two paupers, seven men and fifteen women, were ‘disposed of’ by private contract. Though the names of the individuals who had them in their charge were not listed, money was paid by them to the Overseers of the Poor for the service of the paupers for a one-year term (Appendix B).³⁷ In Kings County, it was recorded by A.W.H. Eaton, that “for many years it was customary for certain ratepayers to “bid off” one or more poor men, women or children for stipulated sums to be paid weekly by the town;” in 1820, a widow from Barrington Township was sold at auction for ten pounds for the year; in Annapolis County, the practice of auctioning off the poor was discouraged as the minutes of the Court of Quarter Sessions “ordered that Overseers of the Poor ... cease to adopt so unfeeling a system but use money voted at freeholders meetings to support the poor...”³⁸

Conditions were much the same in the United States; few formal institutions existed in America to provide support for the destitute before the mid-nineteenth century. As Katz (1984) recounted:

The mentally ill were cared for by their families or dumped in the few large almshouses that had been built in the eighteenth century. The poor were cared for largely through some form of outdoor relief, or were auctioned off to local farmers. Poor strangers were warned out of town.

³⁶ Michael B. Katz, “Poorhouses and the Origin of the Public Old Age Home,” *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly. Health and Society* 62.1 (1984): 116.

³⁷ NSARM Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1852, app. 34, 285.

³⁸ Senior Scribes 17.

Children learned to read in a variety of ways: at home; in tiny, private schools; or in town schools that they attended irregularly.³⁹

However, it was not always a lack of resources which discouraged people from providing outdoor relief to the poor. In Colonial America, as the agrarian, village life gave way to a life of commercialism and modernization, the “evolution of public charity [moved] from a system of boarding the poor among villagers to one that increasingly favored almshouses...the rural poor came to be viewed less as objects of charity and more as costly burdens.”⁴⁰ An earlier change in public charity occurred in urban areas where population growth and mobility deterred people from boarding in the poor; “towns were less able or less willing to impose poor people upon established households than in earlier years. Boarding neighbors and life-long inhabitants was one thing. Trying to board Court imposed poor persons or those not fully accepted as part of the community was quite another.”⁴¹

For many who questioned the viability of public charity and outdoor relief, their uncertainty to support such efforts was often tied to who should receive relief and how one distinguishes between the able- and non able-bodied poor. Above all, the dominant question remained: “How to keep the genuinely needy from starving without breeding a class of paupers who chose to live off public and private bounty rather than to work?”⁴² As defined in the Quincy Report in Massachusetts, a Report of the Committee on the Pauper Laws of This Commonwealth, two classes of paupers exists:

³⁹ Katz 111.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey Guest, “The Boarding of the Dependent Poor in Colonial America,” *The Social Service Review* 63.1 (1989): 94.

⁴¹ G. Guest 95.

⁴² Katz 114.

1. The impotent poor; in which denomination are included all, who are wholly incapable of work, through old age, infancy, sickness or corporeal debility. 2. The able poor; in which denomination are included all, who are capable of work, of some nature, or other; but differing in the degree of their capacity, and in the kind of work, of which they are capable.⁴³

In the nineteenth century, attitudes regarding who should receive relief fell largely in accordance with the English model of poor relief, “only the “impotent” poor were granted relief...the sick, disabled, and aged were suitable objects of charity, as were children. Able-bodied unemployed people were not.”⁴⁴ Whether this can be viewed as a fortunate circumstance or not may be an individual opinion, but many believed “the key to relief was being unable to work. The old, the sick, the infirm, widows, and deserted mothers with young children remained forever eligible for relief while others did not.”⁴⁵ During this time period, attitudes toward able-bodied persons seeking relief evolved in Upper Canada:

In 1817 money was still given *to* able-bodied persons in distress...*in 1820* able-bodied persons, in other words those able to work but unemployed, received cash but only in return for some labour, because now it was feared too easily acquired relief discouraged newcomers from looking for work or settling as soon as possible. Subsequently, during the 1820s, the principle of less-eligibility came increasingly into play. The deserving poor were those unable to work; these were eligible for relief. But able-bodied, unemployed person were now considered less eligible for relief.⁴⁶

⁴³ W. Dean Eastman, “PrimaryResearch.org,” *Quincy Report*, 3 June 2008, Primary Research, accessed 3 March 2011, http://www.primaryresearch.org/pr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=361&catid=63&Itemid=88, 4; Katz 114.

⁴⁴ Lockley 33. Rainer Baehre, “Paupers and Poor Relief in Upper Canada,” *Historical Papers* 16.1 (1981): 58; Kaiser 125.

⁴⁵ Baehre 69.

⁴⁶ Baehre 67. In Upper Canada, changes to the Old Poor Law meant that the able-bodied were no longer paid relief in cash, but in kind (Baehre 75). The principle of eligibility was an accepted policy of the New Poor Law that dictated conditions within the poorhouse had to be less desirable than those conditions on the outside of the institution (Charles E. Rosenberg, “From Almshouse to Hospital: The Shaping of Philadelphia General Hospital,” *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly. Health and Society* 60.1 (1982): 116).

In time, the English Poor Law began to falter and in its place, Poor Law Unions and Relief Unions were being established in England in the mid-1830s; their goal was to eliminate and replace outdoor relief to the able-bodied with the “workhouse test,”⁴⁷ discussed in detail in the following chapter. In principle, the workhouse test distinguished a line between the able-bodied pauper and non able-bodied pauper, for no one would submit to the workhouse if there was an alternative method of relief.

Before specific services were established to address the needs of the poor in the twentieth century, lines distinguishing the poor from the mentally ill, idle, or inebriated were often blurred. Whereas attitudes of the middle and upper class reflected hard work and obedience to God as qualities to strive toward, “poverty and its attendant evils were viewed...[as] flaws in character and morals: the inevitable consequence of sin and disobedience against the will of God.”⁴⁸ Religious beliefs further stigmatized the poor, as laziness and the inability to work were considered cardinal sins and mental illness was the result of possession by the devil.⁴⁹ In reference to the grounds of the Spring Garden Road poorhouse, “one of its most used fittings was a whipping post, for these were the days when lunatics were flogged as if some sort of devil lived within their flesh.”⁵⁰

In the nineteenth century, poverty was “treated as a crime rather than as a calamity...poverty, wretchedness, and even bodily illness, [were], however, compared

⁴⁷ Baehre 77.

⁴⁸ Senior Scribes 14-15.

⁴⁹ Senior Scribes 15. Of the poorhouse, “one of its most used fittings was a whipping post, for these were the days when lunatics were flogged as if some sort of devil lived within their flesh” (Raddall 55).

⁵⁰ Raddall 55.

with insanity, trifling calamities.”⁵¹ Journalists preached in their columns of the dangerous underclass made up of the poorest members of society, while infusing in their readers the notion that poverty was an individual’s responsibility.⁵² As Phelan et al (1997) noted:

Harsh policies and social ostracism were accompanied by negative attitudes toward public relief and a tendency to blame poor people for their situation...Destitute persons were separated from society and were relegated to workhouses, in which rights of citizenship were withdrawn, families separated, and work was difficult and demeaning...those receiving public assistance were required to wear distinctive clothing and badges, which were “rightly ordered to be fix’d as some public Marks of Shame.”⁵³

Such attitudes held by followers of the Elizabethan Poor Law were pervasive and dominated individuals’ responses to the poor and destitute, who felt that making life difficult for the poor would ultimately encourage them to change their unwholesome ways.

Times were difficult in the new colony after its settlement. Countless entries line the archival records from individuals throughout the province requesting assistance from the Overseers of the Poor, and in turn, memorials from the Overseers to the government for payment. Such entries could fill an entire book, but a brief set of examples will suffice to portray that many Nova Scotians were in need of assistance. In 1785, a request from a gentleman, Myers, was sent to the Overseers, requesting five schillings to bury a child who was lying dead in his house;⁵⁴ a Catherine Brown writes in 1786, seeking funds to

⁵¹ Thomas Poyser, “On the Necessity of Establishing Pauper Lunatic Asylums,” *Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal (1840-1842)* 2.48 (1841): 435.

⁵² Hood 3.

⁵³ Jo Phelan, et al., “The Stigma of Homelessness: The Impact of the Label “Homeless” on Attitudes Toward Poor Persons,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 60.4 (1997): 323.

⁵⁴ NSARM RG34-321, series C, C.1, “Petitions: Shelburne County.”

provide continuing care for Solloman Brown, a helpless infant;⁵⁵ in 1817, a petition from Antigonish, Cape St. George and Gulf Settlement, Sydney County requesting bread and seed to aid the poor;⁵⁶ a petition submitted by the Committee of the Halifax Poor Man's Friend Society in 1823 for financial aid;⁵⁷ along with an infinite number of memorials from the Overseers requesting reimbursement for support of the poor, including clothing, passages for families brought to Halifax or sent abroad, medical fees and supplies, rent of the poor house, salary for the poor house keeper, and general supplies for the poor house, blankets, food, and wood.⁵⁸

Despite efforts from some to help ease the suffering of the poor, not everyone was of the same opinion. In response to the increasing number of poor, and subsequently, the rising cost associated with their care, Halifax's middle class petitioned town officials to address the issue. As a result, "beggars, for example, faced whipping and then incarceration in the town's bridewell, a general-purpose prison designed to hold petty criminals, including debtors."⁵⁹ A similar reaction to begging was recorded in the Russian legislature:

A statute of January 21, 1712 provided that the itinerant poor caught begging were to be forcibly interned in poorhouses...should beggars be caught at their games again, they were to be subjected to "harsh

⁵⁵ NSARM RG34-321, series C, C.3E & C.3G, "Petitions: Shelburne County."

⁵⁶ NSARM RG5, series P, vol. 80, # 3.

⁵⁷ NSARM RG5, series P, vol. 80, #29.

⁵⁸ NSARM RG34-321, series C, C.10, C. 11, C. 12, C. 17, "Petitions: Shelburne County."

⁵⁹ Fingard et al 20. In the Minutes of Council of June 21st, 1758, Mr. Josiah Marshall submitted his proposed building plans for the poorhouse. Among the items listed in the plan was a whipping post; interestingly, no explanation or description was required (Atkins 50). Whether the whipping post was used on poorhouse inmates is unofficial, but it was used on criminals, as "Hawkins, a colored gentleman, who dressed in old military uniform with cap and feathers, usually escorted the criminals to and from the workhouse and when occasion required inflicted his 39 lashes on juvenile offenders at the old whipping post, which stood at the south-west corner of the building opposite Messrs. Stairs' office – a system of punishment less expensive than paying their board and lodging for eight or ten weeks from the taxes of the citizens" (Atkins 166-167).

punishment” and sent back to the places from which they had come. A 1718 law went further, and provided that any poor caught in Moscow who beg[ged]...were to be arrested and brought to the Monastery Chancellery where they were to be beaten; money found on beggars was to be given to the persons who captured them.⁶⁰

In an attempt to dissuade idleness, and in turn, criminal offences, inhabitants of Halifax believed that “to employ the poor in any way, [was] to protect the town from outrage and speculation...to preserve the morals and strengthen the independent feelings of the lower classes...”⁶¹ Townships sought opportunities for the unemployed, particularly in winter months when employment was scarce. In Halifax, a shed was erected where men could be hired to break stone for three pence per bushel.⁶² Advertised in the Nova Scotia Gazette on February 8, 1774, a notice was submitted by John Wooden, the keeper of the poor house, to anyone willing to pick oakum or spin, they would receive “good wage, good victuals and drink, and a good warm stove room to work and lodge in if required, without confinement.”⁶³ Soup houses provided relief and nourishment to the poor, particularly in the winter months when unemployment was high⁶⁴ and “it was no uncommon sight to visit the Poor House and see over fifty children being served a hot breakfast every morning before going to their lessons in the class rooms.”⁶⁵

During the early days of settlement, benevolent societies were frequently formed by the wives and daughters of prosperous church members who would “visit destitute

⁶⁰ Daniel H. Kaiser, “The Poor and Disabled in Early Eighteenth-Century Russian Towns,” *Journal of Social History* 32.1 (1998): 129-130.

⁶¹ Saunders 93.

⁶² Saunders 92.

⁶³ NSARM John Wooden, “Employment for the Poor,” *Nova Scotia Gazette* 8 February, 1774, vol. IV: 3.

⁶⁴ Saunders 93.

⁶⁵ Grant, “Historical Sketches,” 17.5 (1938): 301.

members and dispense food, clothing, and fuel.”⁶⁶ Non-governmental, charitable societies emerged throughout the province, such as the Charitable Irish Society and the North British Society, established to assist poor immigrants arriving in Halifax.⁶⁷

The Society for the Relief of the Poor, established in 1809, was possibly the colony’s first voluntary organization directed toward the poor and was formed with the “sole purpose of giving relief which was to be based on the need and not limited to persons of a particular congregation, settlement, or national origin.”⁶⁸ During its two years of service, the Society managed to uphold its proposed mission to “investigate the cases of all persons applying for relief, and to afford them such assistances as their necessities might appear to require”⁶⁹ by replacing relief with paid work when possible and providing food, clothes, medical supplies and assistance, shelter and fuel to the poor of Halifax, as well as to the poor of neighboring towns. Being satisfied that the Society accomplished its mission, members of the Society stated:

In several instances,” they wrote, “particularly in the winter of 1809, the relief afford has been the means of saving the persons applying from perishing – there have without doubt been some cases in which the Committee has been deceived and where they have been induced to extend their aid to unworthy objects, but they have the satisfaction of knowing that whenever real distress has occurred either in the Town or its neighbourhood [*sic*], for these last two years, it has been immediately mitigated if not altogether relieved from the funds of the Society.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Fingard et al 80.

⁶⁷ Raddall 107, 187. See Appendix A for a list of voluntary organizations that “either served to replace or supplement poor law responsibilities or acted as advocates for improved social legislation” (Senior Scribes 36-37).

⁶⁸ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 9 #11, G.E. Hart, “Early Private Relief in Nova Scotia.”

⁶⁹ NSARM Hart.

⁷⁰ NSARM Hart.

In 1820, the Poor Man's Friend Society was established to address the needs of the poor and transient poor of Halifax and to "...destroy the system of public begging."⁷¹ As the town was divided into wards, three or four gentlemen from each ward were assigned to visit and monitor the poor. While attempting to relieve the distress of the poor during its seven years of existence, the Society concentrated its efforts in obtaining employment for the able-bodied poor, particularly throughout the winter months.⁷²

One area of particular concern for the colony was the relationship between disease and poverty. Largely due to the vast number of immigrant ships landing in Halifax in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a constant threat in the new colony of epidemics, such as smallpox, typhus fever, cholera, yellow fever, diphtheria, malignant measles, and scarlet fever.⁷³ Slowly, measures were put in place to alleviate the potential for epidemics to occur. Preventive medicine was not a common practice in eighteenth and nineteenth century Halifax; typically inoculations were administered after an epidemic had already occurred.⁷⁴ However, in 1799, an act was passed in the province which provided that:

Persons desirous of being inoculated may do so provided that the house or place where they reside, during the time of their being infected, shall be at least 160 rods distant from any other house and that they take care to prevent or restrain any persons infected from leaving further than 80 rods from such house; and that they make it known to the township.⁷⁵

To address the issue of infected immigrants seeking refuge in the new colony, in 1761 "an Act to Prevent the Spreading of Contagious Distempers" was passed, in which

⁷¹ Marble, *Physicians* 348.

⁷² Atkins 195.

⁷³ Grant, "Historical Sketches" 17.8 (1938): 491.

⁷⁴ Marble, *Physicians* 143.

⁷⁵ Grant, "Historical Sketches," 17.8 (1938): 492.

ships carrying diseased passengers were to remain quarantined in the harbour.⁷⁶ After the smallpox epidemic of 1827, landed immigrants to Halifax who were infected with the disease were ordered by the magistrates not to leave their ship and all children were to be vaccinated against the disease. Similar practices were already in existence in England, practices that Halifax doctors began initiating in their own colony.⁷⁷ Quarantine would continue as a preventive measure until laws of sanitation were passed in 1852.⁷⁸

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, medical relief for the poor was inadequate, to say the least. A number of civilian, military, naval, and prison hospitals had been established shortly after the colony's settlement; however, "half of these hospitals were temporary and were closed within the two years of opening."⁷⁹ For the most part, the sick poor were cared for in the hospital ward of the poor house, where it was not uncommon that "a poor person who was healthy when he entered, was sick and ailing when he left."⁸⁰ By 1799, only three hospitals continued to function in the city: the hospital for the Maroons at Dartmouth, the naval hospital, and the poor house hospital.⁸¹ By the 1850s, the Commissioners of the Poor had resolved that "all epidemic or fever cases arising in the City be handed over to Dr. Lawyer and not admitted into the asylum;"⁸² however the minutes do not indicate where or to what extent Dr. Lawyer cared for fever or epidemic cases.

⁷⁶ Marble, *Surgeons* 200 (Appendix Three).

⁷⁷ Pryke 40-41.

⁷⁸ Marguerite H. L. Grant, "Historical Sketches of Old Hospitals and Alms Houses in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1749 to 1859," *The Nova Scotia Medical Bulletin* 17.4 (1938): 236.

⁷⁹ Marble, *Surgeons* 145.

⁸⁰ Saunders 95.

⁸¹ Marble, *Surgeons* 145.

⁸² NSARM RG25, series C, vol. 5, 314, "Record Book, 1840-1860, 20 December 1852."

Many inhabitants felt that medical relief for the poor should come primarily through the poor house, for even those suffering from infectious diseases, “were not within society’s purview.”⁸³ Therefore, it was not unexpected in the first half of the nineteenth century when doctors “attempted to expand public medical facilities and medical services to the poor, their efforts conflicted with the prevailing ideas of social welfare at the time.”⁸⁴ In eighteenth century England, the sick poor typically received medical care through an almshouse or poor house and were only occasionally treated in hospitals. England did not see the necessity of providing hospital services to their colonists for extended periods of time, and it came as little surprise that Cornwallis was met with some resistance when he approached the Lords of Trade to maintain the hospital in Halifax after the harsh winter of 1749/1750.⁸⁵ The poor house therefore became a key site for medical attendance and this was particularly the case during periods of epidemic disease.

Medical care was limited at best, and the unfortunate souls infected by contagious diseases “were forced either to rely on an inadequate hospital in the poor asylum or to seek a doctor’s charity.”⁸⁶ Annual outbreaks of smallpox were not uncommon throughout the province; however, in 1827 an outbreak of typhus fever, coupled with smallpox, swarmed the town, creating panic and disorder among the inhabitants.⁸⁷

In the summer of 1827, several emigrant ships from Ireland discharged passengers suffering from typhus fever in Halifax; however, before the disease was brought to the

⁸³ Pryke 40.

⁸⁴ Pryke 40.

⁸⁵ Marble, *Surgeons* 26.

⁸⁶ Pryke 39.

⁸⁷ Marble, *Physicians* 149.

attention of the magistrates, many of the passengers had already sought refuge in various boarding houses throughout the town. Ill-equipped to handle such a large number of infected people, the town sent approximately sixty of them to the poor house hospital, which was already suffering in its overcrowded state,⁸⁸ while others were sent to Bankhead Farm, where a fever hospital was temporarily established specifically for emigrants infected with smallpox.⁸⁹ “Apart from the inoculation of smallpox, local doctors could do little for the victims of this disease, other than subject them to the torture of bleeding, blistering and purgation.”⁹⁰ Discrepancies over the final death toll remain, as no precise count was conducted; however, “a committee of the House of Assembly estimated that their number totaled 800.”⁹¹

Periodically, other infectious diseases surfaced in the town, threatening the lives of the inhabitants and bringing overdue attention to the fact that no measures were in place to manage the possibility of an epidemic. Though it remains uncertain how cholera first reached the inhabitants of Halifax in 1834, whether through infected troops of the First Battalion Rifle Brigade or from Irish immigrants discharged from their vessels and lodged in the poor house, the disease ran rampant through the town.⁹²

Spreading from the docks into the barracks, the poor house and the jail, cholera quickly became a mass killer, fostering panic and flight among people high and

⁸⁸ Pryke 40.

⁸⁹ Marble, *Physicians* 150.

⁹⁰ Judith Fingard, Janet Guildford, and David Sutherland, *Halifax: the first 250 years* (Halifax: Formac, 1999) 18.

⁹¹ Pryke 40. Lieutenant Governor Kempt indicated that “out of a population of 11,000, more than 800 have died since the month of January last, two-thirds of whom were either emigrants from Ireland or persons whose deaths were occasioned by infectious diseases introduced by them” (Marble, *Physicians* 153). In the minutes of Council for November 8, 1827, sixty-one persons died in the fever hospital, 247 died in the poorhouse, and 138 died in the town, resulting in a total of 446, “the majority from smallpox and typhus fever” (Marble, *Surgeons* 151).

⁹² Pryke 49.

low. By early September Halifax had the appearance of a “City of the Plague,” complete with bonfires lit to drive off “noxious vapours” and death carts rumbling through the streets to collect a multiplying array of corpses.⁹³

As a result, the poor house hospital became yet again the recipient of infected persons, though its time as a cholera hospital would be short-lived. During this same period, the poor house was struggling to care for its own inmates infected with cholera, as four inmates had died from the disease and five more were dangerously ill.⁹⁴ Thus, realizing that it did not have sufficient funds or medical attendants, the Commissioners of the Poor proposed that another facility be established. Despite objections on the part of the inhabitants, given its close proximity to the post office and St. Paul’s Church, placing thousands at risk of contracting the disease,⁹⁵ Dalhousie College was chosen to serve the inhabitants of the town infected with cholera.⁹⁶ Their fears may have had deeper roots than the mere location of the temporary hospital, as they learned that cholera was not limited to the poor or the young.⁹⁷ Lasting from July to September 1834, cholera took the lives of six hundred civilians and 59 soldiers.⁹⁸

In response to the lack of medical care available to the poor, John Stirling, a former naval surgeon, and William Grigor, a graduate of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, opened a visiting dispensary in Halifax in November 1829, that “was to be open for an hour each day and a medical gentlemen would be in charge to give advice and

⁹³ Fingard et al 51.

⁹⁴ NSARM RG25, series C, vol. 5, 101, “Record Book of the Commissioners of the Halifax Poor Asylum, 1829-1839, 7 August 1834.”

⁹⁵ Grant, “Historical Sketches,” 17.8 (1938): 495.

⁹⁶ Pryke 50.

⁹⁷ Twohig 335; Pryke 41.

⁹⁸ Marble, *Physicians* 164.

medicines to those who were unable to pay from their own resources.”⁹⁹ Through private and public grants, the dispensary continued to offer medical care to thousands of poor recipients; a fact that offered great joy to its supporters since the clinic “enable[d] the ill to remain with their families, rather than seek admittance to the poor house.”¹⁰⁰

Such dispensaries were in existence in Great Britain and the United States, but were relatively unknown in the Atlantic Provinces during this time period.¹⁰¹ In 1924, the Halifax Visiting Dispensary moved into the Dalhousie University Public Health Clinic, where it remained in charge of the distribution of drug prescriptions and surgical supplies.¹⁰² Dispensaries would remain an important source of medical assistance for the poor in Halifax, even after the City Hospital, later the City and Provincial, and now named the Victoria General Hospital was established in 1859.¹⁰³

By the second half of the nineteenth century, specialized institutions began to surface throughout the province in which “certain elements in the population might end up in orphanages or industrial schools if children, hospitals or asylums if ill or disabled, homes for the aged if elderly, jail if incorrigible.”¹⁰⁴ The institutional response of the poor house emerged throughout North America and overseas as a result of similar circumstances; this development is discussed in the following chapter.

⁹⁹ Marguerite H. L. Grant, “Historical Sketches of Old Hospitals and Alms Houses in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1749 to 1859,” *The Nova Scotia Medical Bulletin* 17.5 (1938): 301.

¹⁰⁰ Pryke 45.

¹⁰¹ Pryke 44; Grant, “Historical Sketches,” 17.5 (1938): 301.

¹⁰² Erin Elizabeth Rushton, “Dalhousie University Archives Online Finding Aids, *The Archives of the Halifax Visiting Dispensary: A Guide*,” April 2003, Dalhousie University, accessed 17 June 2011, <http://www.library.dal.ca/DUASC/FindingAids/MS_13_84/>.

¹⁰³ Grant, “Historical Sketches,” 17.5 (1938): 304.

¹⁰⁴ Fingard et al 109.

3 ~ *The Emergence of the Poor House*

By the late eighteenth century, whether due to a lack of resources or the changing attitudes of individuals, assistance toward the poor and poor relief efforts began to diminish and the poor and destitute were left to struggle once more for a way to survive.¹⁰⁵ Where no outside relief was available, the poor were often left to seek ‘indoor or institutional relief’ of which the poor house was a typical example. As early as the seventeenth-century, workhouses and poor houses began to emerge in England’s urban centers, becoming “dumping ground[s] for all kinds of human misery, including the mentally ill, the severely retarded, unmarried mothers, children and anyone who could not get by in the community or who happened to offend the moral code of the time.”¹⁰⁶ Since their beginnings, poor houses served a multitude of functions, including serving as a general hospital,¹⁰⁷ a lunatic asylum, an orphan house, a sailor’s hospital, a lying-in institution, a nursery, a hospital for medical and surgical cases, and a ward for venereal and alcoholic cases.¹⁰⁸

In effect, the workhouse became “an instrument of social policy used not only to determine if the applicant was able to work, but also as a deterrent for idleness. The applicant was “offered the house,” and “it was assumed that no able-bodied person would accept this form of assistance because of the horrible conditions in the workhouse.”¹⁰⁹ The “workhouse test,” later termed the “poor house test” after the Poor Relief Act was

¹⁰⁵ G. Guest 94-95.

¹⁰⁶ Senior Scribes 20.

¹⁰⁷ “The term ‘general hospital’ in those days [eighteenth century] did not infer that it was open to the public but a hospital for the treatment of all cases among the military or navy only” (Grant, “Historical Sketches,” 17.4 (1938): 234).

¹⁰⁸ Rosenberg 116; NSARM Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1832, app 49, page 291.

¹⁰⁹ Senior Scribes 19.

amended in 1912, was initially developed in Bristol in the early eighteenth century,¹¹⁰ giving Overseers of the Poor the authority to refuse relief to any person who declined to be lodged and maintained within the house.¹¹¹ The test worked so effectively that in 1723, an Act was passed legislating churchwardens and Overseers to establish workhouses in each parish, while authorizing the Overseers to refuse relief to those who failed the test.¹¹² As a result, “institutionalization provided an opportunity to rehabilitate the poor and discourage employable, able-bodied vagrants...an efficient means of caring for the “worthy” poor and a prison-like setting for willful “idlers”.”¹¹³

By the mid-nineteenth century, the idea of the poor house as an effective means of poor relief was introduced in North America.¹¹⁴ Advocates of this mode of poor relief were heavily influenced by the Yates and Quincy reports which “rejected the views of British political economists who advocated the total abolition of all relief to the poor...[however], echo[ing] the sentiments of British writers who advocated replacing most forms of outdoor relief, the auction, and the contract system with a network of poorhouses (or almshouses).”¹¹⁵ According to the two reports, “a broad array of

¹¹⁰ Senior Scribes 19.

¹¹¹ Clarke 32.

¹¹² Clarke 32.

¹¹³ Glenn C. Altschuler and Jan M. Saltzgeber, “Clearinghouse for Paupers: The Poorfarm of Seneca County, New York, 1830-1860,” *Journal of Social History* 17.4 (1984): 573.

¹¹⁴ Wagner 10.

¹¹⁵ Katz 117. The Quincy Report of Massachusetts (1821) and the Yates Report of New York (1822) were legislative reports, written to address the problem of poor relief in their respective state. Prompted by an increase in pauperism, the Quincy and Yates Committees sought to determine how each community provided relief to the poor, to what extent the system(s) of relief were effective, and what other avenues could be implemented to address the issue of the poor (Eastman; Underhill 813). The reports indicated that “the most economical mode [of poor relief] is that of the Almshouses, Workhouses, or Houses of Industry, in which work is provided for every degree of ability amongst the paupers. Thus the able poor are made to provide, at least partially for their own support, or for the comfort of the impotent poor.” (Eastman)

economic, disciplinary, rehabilitative, and humanitarian goals” could be achieved with the establishment of poor houses.¹¹⁶ Within the institution:

Work – especially farm labor – would be mandatory for all inmates neither too sick nor too feeble, and both idleness and alcohol would be strictly prohibited. Able-bodied men would be rigorously pruned from the relief tolls; begging would be barred and punished; children would be schooled; and settlement laws would be greatly simplified. To their sponsors, poorhouses were partly an attempt to mitigate the harshness of contemporary relief practice by ending the auctioning of the poor to the lowest bidder and stopping the shunting of the poor from town to town regardless of their health or the weather.¹¹⁷

In addition to distinguishing between the able-bodied poor and the non able-bodied poor, the workhouse test served to decrease the rising cost of pauperism and poor relief efforts.¹¹⁸ Throughout the nineteenth century, many communities petitioned for the establishment of a local poor house as they saw the institution as a relief for the poor taxes they were required to pay.¹¹⁹ In Canada, the idea was presented that poor taxes could be kept to a minimum if all the poor and destitute were cared for under one roof, hence the establishment of poor houses.¹²⁰ Proposals for poor houses were also initiated in several Nova Scotia townships prior to Confederation where it was believed that “the cost per inmate would be significantly less than boarding individual paupers.”¹²¹ By the end of the antebellum era, the Charleston Poor House commissioners continued to believe it was more cost effective to provide support to the poor through the poorhouse than to

¹¹⁶ Katz 117.

¹¹⁷ Katz 117.

¹¹⁸ Clarke 41.

¹¹⁹ James W. Ely, Jr., “There Are Few Subjects in Political Economy of Greater Difficulty: The Poor Laws of Antebellum South,” *American Bar Foundation Research Journal* 10.4 (1985): 853-854; Altschuler 573.

¹²⁰ Dennis Guest, *The Emergence of Social Security in Canada*, 3rd ed. (Vancouver: UBC, 2003) 12.

¹²¹ Marble, *Physicians* 362.

continue outdoor relief efforts.¹²² Evidence from English poor houses reported that “every town or city with a poorhouse reported a reduction in the cost of poor relief and an improved moral climate.”¹²³

Aside from the tangible aspects of the poor house, there were those who “probably viewed living in the poorhouse as conferring “disgrace and infamous notoriety.” They were “too proud to go to the poor house. Many of them rather suffer than go there.”¹²⁴ In some instances, alternatives such as starvation, emigration, prostitution, and even suicide, were deemed more tolerable by the poor than becoming a poor house inmate. In response to his nephew’s pleas to join him in America, emigrant J. F. Bray wrote, “ANYTHING before an English workhouse.”¹²⁵ The memories shared by the daughters of the Superintendent of the Lewiston City Farm tell of “the loss of pride that accompanied “going to the poor farm”...remember[ing] the old folks coming to the farm, and crying, you know. To them it was such a dishonor to be at the farm. They lost everything and the children couldn’t manage.”¹²⁶

In his article, “Poorhouses and the Origins of the Public Old Age Home,” Katz (1984) discussed the emergence of institutions throughout America in the nineteenth century, founded specifically to care for disadvantaged members of society, with the vision that:

All of the new institutions rested on optimistic assumptions about the possibility of reform, rehabilitation, and education. Institutions would seal off individuals from the corrupting, tempting, and distracting influences of

¹²² Ely 853-854; Altschuler 573.

¹²³ Katz 117.

¹²⁴ Lockley 36-37.

¹²⁵ Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Penguin, 1988): 279.

¹²⁶ Wagner 30.

the world long enough for a kind but firm regimen to transform their behaviour and reorder their personalities. Even poorhouses shared in this rehabilitative vision; they would suppress intemperance, the primary cause of pauperism, and inculcate the habit of steady work.¹²⁷

By the mid-nineteenth century, the number of specialized institutions in America grew throughout the country, so that by the end of the Civil War, poor houses were established not only in urban regions of the country, but also in rural areas which previously depended on outdoor relief methods to care for the poor.¹²⁸ Rosenberg noted that “by the first decades of the nineteenth century, every American city had established an almshouse; the larger the city, the greater the number of rootless and dependent who were its natural clients.”¹²⁹

Around this time, similar trends were occurring in Canada. In 1786, three years after Nova Scotia passed its own poor law legislation, New Brunswick followed suit. Before such legislation was passed, the responsibility of poor relief largely fell on the parishes, and in smaller, rural communities, the auctioning of the poor was deemed a more cost-effective solution than paying the cost and operation fees of a poor house. The practice of auction was in place until the end of nineteenth century; however, in large, urban regions, the growth of public institutions such as the poor house was becoming increasingly common by the mid-nineteenth century. In Prince Edward Island, poor relief measures were primarily the responsibility of the provincial government, and given its limited size and population, English poor laws were never established on the Island. In a similar fashion, Newfoundland’s poor was relieved by the provincial government grants

¹²⁷ Katz 111.

¹²⁸ Katz 111.

¹²⁹ Rosenberg 110.

which were given on an ad hoc basis; however, when such grants were not forthcoming, the help of the community and voluntary charitable organizations were relied upon.¹³⁰

Poor law administration had not been introduced into Upper Canada as it had been in most other British North American colonies; the insane were cared for by family, warned out, boarded out, or confined in the district jail. However, by the 1830s, urban middle class attitudes toward the insane, the poor, and criminals, were changing; attitudes of the former were built on a dedicated work ethic, sobriety and respectability which coincided with the actions and habits of the latter.¹³¹ As a result, quarantine hospitals began to emerge as a response to epidemics, the Kingston penitentiary was established to “move long-term offenders from local to provincial control,” and a provincial insane asylum was erected in the 1850s. In Lower Canada, until the immigration of English Protestants in the early eighteenth century, the French Catholic tradition held tightly to the church being the sole supporter for the poor. As the population expanded with an influx of immigrants, separate institutions began to emerge to care for “various categories of poor and dependent persons.”¹³² In the Canadian west, following colonial tradition, concerns of poor relief and institutional care fell upon local governments.¹³³

In Nova Scotia, the result of the County Incorporation Act of 1879¹³⁴ led many counties to erect poor houses, though prior to this date, five poor houses were already in

¹³⁰ D. Guest 12-14.

¹³¹ Thomas E. Brown, “The origins of the asylum in Upper Canada, 1830-1839: Towards an interpretation,” *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 1.1 (1984): 45.

¹³² D. Guest 15.

¹³³ D. Guest 16.

¹³⁴ NSARM. Statutes of Nova Scotia, Chapter 1, p. 1-29. An Act entitled “The County Incorporation Act” passed 14 April 1879. “The first extensive creation of local governments came from the County Incorporation Act of 1879. This Act established 24 rural municipalities on the basis of boundaries used by the Sessions, essentially for court purposes. These boundaries had been fairly firmly established by 1863,

existence in the province: one in Halifax County, two in Kings County, one in Antigonish County and one in Yarmouth County (Appendix C).¹³⁵ It is uncertain why these counties were the first to have poor houses; however, the relief system of boarding out and auctioning off of paupers was maintained by all other counties until poor houses were established in their localities. Individuals who were unable to function independently and were faced with no other alternative but to seek indoor relief essentially surrendered their freedom to the Overseers of the Poor, who then assumed complete control.¹³⁶

Documented in the 1885 Halifax City Charter, it was stated that “the poor of the City of Halifax, who by law are chargeable upon its inhabitants, shall be accommodated, supported and relieved in the *Poor Asylum, under the management of the Commissioners of Public Charities*”.¹³⁷

The alternatives to boarding out and auctioning off the poor as laid out in the Yates and Quincy reports, coupled with the philanthropic work of Dorothy Dix, who campaigned in the 1830s to have the mentally ill removed from almshouses,¹³⁸ left many poor law reformers holding to the notion that “in their early years, it was at least plausible to think of almshouses optimistically, as humane, reformatory institutions, reducing expenditures for relief and checking the growth of a demoralized pauper class.”¹³⁹

and except for minor adjustments have never been changed since. The one exception is a relatively small change to move the Mattie Settlement area from Guysborough to Antigonish. These rural municipalities ensured that all of Nova Scotia was covered by some form of elected municipal government” Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, *Municipal Facts, Figures, and History – The History of Municipal Government in Nova Scotia*, December 2003 Municipal Relations Division, accessed 12 November 2010 <http://www.gov.ns.ca/snsmr/muns/info/history/originHIST1.asp>.

¹³⁵ Senior Scribes 18.

¹³⁶ Senior Scribes 21.

¹³⁷ 1885 Halifax City Charter. Title XI. Poor Asylum and Hospital. Pt. 652.

¹³⁸ Wagner 10.

¹³⁹ Katz 117.

Unfortunately, the majority of descriptions given by visitors of poor houses, whether in Canada or abroad, were far from suitable. Descriptions of various poor houses in the United States depicted conditions as “extremely comfortless...in a miserable and dilapidated condition”¹⁴⁰... “dilapidated, pathetic and rickety state of the building – its rooms so low, so confined, badly lighted and worse ventilated...inmates seem rather the victims of famine or pestilence than the subjects of common benevolence or decent charity”¹⁴¹ ... “gross want of provision for the common necessities of physical health and comfort.”¹⁴² Conditions in New York’s Seneca County poorfarm were so extreme that between 1846 and 1850, two-thirds of male inmates ran away from the institution.¹⁴³

Conditions in Canadian poor houses were just as grave. Upon visiting a New Brunswick almshouse, Dr. William Bayard noted, “the food of the pauper is too often reduced to the lowest standard capable of sustaining life.”¹⁴⁴ Here, denial of meals was a punishment for theft.¹⁴⁵ The overcrowded state of the Spring Garden Road poor house was detrimental to the health of inmates for “in the Lunatic Asylum there are nineteen persons, but there is not suitable accommodation for more than twelve...there are 29 sick paupers in the Lunatic Asylum, there being no convalescent room in the Poores’ Asylum for their accommodation.”¹⁴⁶ While investigating conditions of the insane poor at the Home District Gaol in Upper Canada in 1830, William Lyon Mackenzie noted that “he found three female lunatics confined...in the cells below the ground floor...lodged in

¹⁴⁰ Ely 855.

¹⁴¹ Altschuler 580.

¹⁴² Katz 127.

¹⁴³ Altschuler 580.

¹⁴⁴ James M. Whalen, “Last resort for the poor: The Almshouse, 1843-1900,”

http://www.poorhousestory.com/CANADA_Article_Whalen.htm

¹⁴⁵ Whalen, “Last resort.”

¹⁴⁶ NSARM Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1842, App. No. 73b.

locked up cribs, on straw, two in one crib, and the other by herself...the smell...was certainly most disagreeable...their confinement...severe beyond that of the most hardened criminal.¹⁴⁷

Classification, although an initial goal in most poor houses, was relatively non-existent; “many poorhouses did not separate paupers by age and condition, allowing moral inmates to mingle with the degraded, and failing to send the insane or other handicapped inmates to special institutions.”¹⁴⁸ In a report submitted to the Nova Scotia House of Assembly in 1832, it was recorded that “there are 74 children now there, orphans, all except 9 are under ten years of age. A great number of these tender creatures, from the crowded state of the Poor-House, are placed to sleep with adults, male and female, without any regard to fitness of health or morals.”¹⁴⁹ Commenting on New Brunswick almshouses in 1929, a Welfare Survey observed, “in many cases aged men and women; the feeble-minded; the senile; crippled and incurable; children and infants were all found in the same house, separated only by one broad classification of sex.”¹⁵⁰

Thus, as with our English neighbors to the east, by the mid-nineteenth century North America began to follow suit; the institutional setting of the poorhouse began to replace the practices of outdoor relief, boarding out and auction off the poor pauper. By the 1750s, Nova Scotia’s first poor house, the Spring Garden Road poorhouse, was established in Halifax County. To the poor and the sick, to the aged and the young, to the widow and to the orphan, to the prostitute and to the drunk; with minimal comfort in

¹⁴⁷ Brown 29.

¹⁴⁸ Katz 124.

¹⁴⁹ NSARM Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1832, p. 164, appendix 49.

¹⁵⁰ Whalen, “Last resort.”

food, shelter and protection, with minimal attempts at rehabilitation, the poor house was their refuge. Some inmates came and left, while others lived out their remaining days within the walls of the public's answer to poor relief.

As the story of the poorhouse continues, an examination of the three poor relief institutions of Halifax, along with a look at similar institutions located abroad, will offer important insight into an inmate's experience with death in the poor house.

4 ~ Halifax's Response to Indoor Poor Relief

The Spring Garden Road Poor House

As early as 1752, the idea of establishing some form of institutional relief for the poor in Halifax was already being addressed by the City's justices of the peace.¹

Recorded in the Minutes of Council in 1752, a memorial was presented by the Justices of the Peace of Halifax to establish a Workhouse (also referred to as a House of Correction² or Bridewell³) to maintain the:

many idle and disorderly persons within the Town of Halifax who have no visible means of support themselves and are daily, through idleness and a Vagabond way of Life committing Thefts and Petty Larceny whereby to subsist themselves...and there is no other Punishment provided without sending them to Prison, where they remain useless and Idle, and are a charge to the Government...if a Bridewell or Workhouse were erected, to which such offenders might be committed and there employed in hard labour, and also be subject to such Punishment as your Excellency and Honours shall think reasonable...Such people do...pay for their subsistence...by picking oakum, and making Netts for the Fishery⁴.

Though its purpose was to house those individuals listed in the above passage, three rooms were set aside in the workhouse specifically for the poor, so that "the persons

¹ Nova Scotia, *Journal*, minutes of 24 November 1763.

² Nova Scotia, *Journal*, minutes of 24 November 1763. In the recorded minutes, the Joint Committee makes reference to the House of Corrections and the Workhouse as being the same institution. "A casual perusal of the early records of Poor Law administration and the Reports of the Inspector of Humane and Penal Institutions indicates much confusion about the terms "poor house," "mental hospital" and "asylum." We find such terms as almshouse, county home, county asylum, poor asylum, county farm, poor farm and poor house, all used interchangeably in the Reports of the Inspector of Human and Penal Institutions. Those who used these terms in the 18th, 19th and even 20th century tended to view poverty, mental illness and mental disability as moral defects. Indeed, the Halifax Workhouse of 1758 eventually contained the poor house as an integral part of it, and the difference between the two was so blurred in the early documentation that one may well conclude that the public viewed the two as one and the same institution" (Senior Scribes 25).

³ Marble, *Physicians* 217. "The original Bridewell was in London, England, a decadent mansion converted to use as a house of correction and hospital. Its name was adopted for each similar institution in Britain. The term indicated minor crime, major poverty, and the presence of some degree of disease or insanity as features of its custodial atmosphere" (H. L. Scammell, M.D., "The Halifax Bridewell," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 64.2 (1951): 163.

⁴ Marble, *Surgeons* 74.

entitled to receive alms, [c]ould be separated from those committed to the House of Correction for being disorderly.”⁵ This was the first instance where the provincial government observed a distinction between the poor and the criminals in the workhouse, thus providing separate living quarters for both groups.⁶ Evidence of this distinction was also apparent when Council granted the Overseers of the Poor full responsibility of the poor, while those committed to the House of Corrections remained under the direction of the Justices of the Peace.⁷

According to the Minutes of the Executive Council of Nova Scotia for June 21, 1758, the plans for the proposed workhouse, designed by Mr. Josiah Marshall, included one building, measuring 50 feet long, 20 feet wide and 8 feet high.⁸ However, when the House of Assembly met again in October of that same year, it was decided that a larger workhouse should be erected.⁹ Subsequent to the preparation of this bill, a committee was appointed to search for a proper piece of land upon which the Workhouse could be built; four acres were allotted, lying between the Governor’s farm and Fort Cornwallis for the workhouse (Figure 1).¹⁰ Its location on Spring Garden Road, recorded in an Allotment Book dated March 12, 1873, was positioned as follows:

Situate[d] lying and being abutted and bounded as follows: Southerly by the street leading from Pleasant Street into the Common and there measuring two hundred feet; westerly by Joel Waterman’s lott and there measuring two hundred fifty five feet; northerly by Frike Dilk Hoar’s field and there measuring two hundred feet; and easterly by the Burying Ground and there measuring two hundred and fifty feet containing one acre twenty

⁵ Nova Scotia, *Journal*, minutes of 24 November 1763.

⁶ Marble, *Surgeons* 83.

⁷ Nova Scotia, *Journal*, minutes of 24 November 1763.

⁸ Marble, *Physicians* 194.

⁹ Nova Scotia, *Journal*, minutes of 13 October, 1758, 10. A bill for the establishment of a Workhouse was ordered to be prepared.

¹⁰ Nova Scotia, *Journal*, minutes of 14 December 1758, 43.

In December 1758, an Act for Erecting a House of Correction or Work-House, within the Town of Halifax was passed, and a building constructed of masonry, measuring 60 feet long, 25 feet wide and 12 feet high, was to be erected.¹² At last, it appears that the workhouse was established close to 1760, for in the spring of that year Council provided £50 for the purchase of materials that would be used by the residents of the workhouse in their labor.¹³ As the number of poor and destitute individuals who were reliant on the workhouse for refuge increased, it appears that the building originally constructed as a workhouse became referred to, more and more, as the poor house.¹⁴

In 1802, the Commissioners for the Superintendence, Relief, and Management of the Poor in the town and peninsula of Halifax conducted an inspection of the poor house and recommended that “rather than repairing the existing building, a new Asylum building be erected”.¹⁵ Council rejected this proposal, and no new institution or additions were made for over a decade. With an increase in the number of criminals, poor, lunatics, and orphans who found refuge in the workhouse and poor house during the early nineteenth century, a small stone building was added to the existing institution, sometime between 1812 and 1813, to provide separate accommodations for the lunatics. In 1839, a partition was erected in this small stone building to separate the male and female lunatics;

¹² Nova Scotia, *Journal*, minutes of 14 December 1758, 43.

¹³ Marble, *Surgeons* 80.

¹⁴ Marble, *Physicians* 193. Thus, it is important to note that when historical documents make reference to either the Workhouse or the poorhouse, they are referring to the original stone building erected in 1760, which served both purposes. According to Marble, in 1815 a separate building was renovated on the workhouse lot to house the criminals. The poor, elderly, physically and/or mentally disabled, orphans and vagrants were kept in the original building which was now referred to as the poor house.

¹⁵ Marble, *Physicians* 195.

however, due to problems of overcrowding, in 1844, an additional wing was constructed on to the larger building to exclusively house female lunatics.¹⁶

The 1830 Plan of the Town of Halifax illustrates four structures on the site of the workhouse lot: two structures corresponding to the House of Corrections, one designated as the poor house and the last as the jail (Figure 2). Setting aside any confusion with the interchangeable use of the words workhouse and poor house, we can presume that the poor house building, as indicated, is the one large rectangular structure, whereas the House of Corrections is shown as a medium sized building with a smaller structure situated at its south west corner. The jail is shown south of the poor house, closest to Spring Garden Road. It may be possible that the size of the poor house structure is much longer owing to the fact that an addition was made in 1812-1813 for the lunatics' ward.¹⁷

The Plan of the City of Halifax, December 1851, shows the poor house again as a large rectangular structure, situated lengthwise east to west parallel to Spring Garden Road (Figure 3). Neither plan (Figures 2 and 3) shows evidence of additional buildings that would have contained the various industries located on the grounds of the poor house lot, such as a coffin factory, a cow house, stable and barn, bakery, straw hat factory, and a cooperage, along with the oakum, rope, mats, tubs, and buckets that were already being manufactured, in an attempt to generate revenue for the institution.¹⁸

¹⁶ Marble, *Physicians* 194-209.

¹⁷ The second addition made to the poor house, the female lunatics ward, was only completed in 1844 and, therefore would not be depicted in this plan of Halifax.

¹⁸ Marble, *Physicians* 201-209. It is possible that the addition made to the original building did not change the outline of the structure, except lengthwise. Thus, the cartographer may not have felt it necessary to make note of the addition (perhaps adding a dotted line where the addition was made would have sufficed). Marble mentions that the poor house and the 'lunatic ward' were indeed connected together, despite Dr. William Almon's remark of visiting two separate buildings during one of his visits in 1825, providing medical care to the inmates (Marble, *Physicians* 199-200).

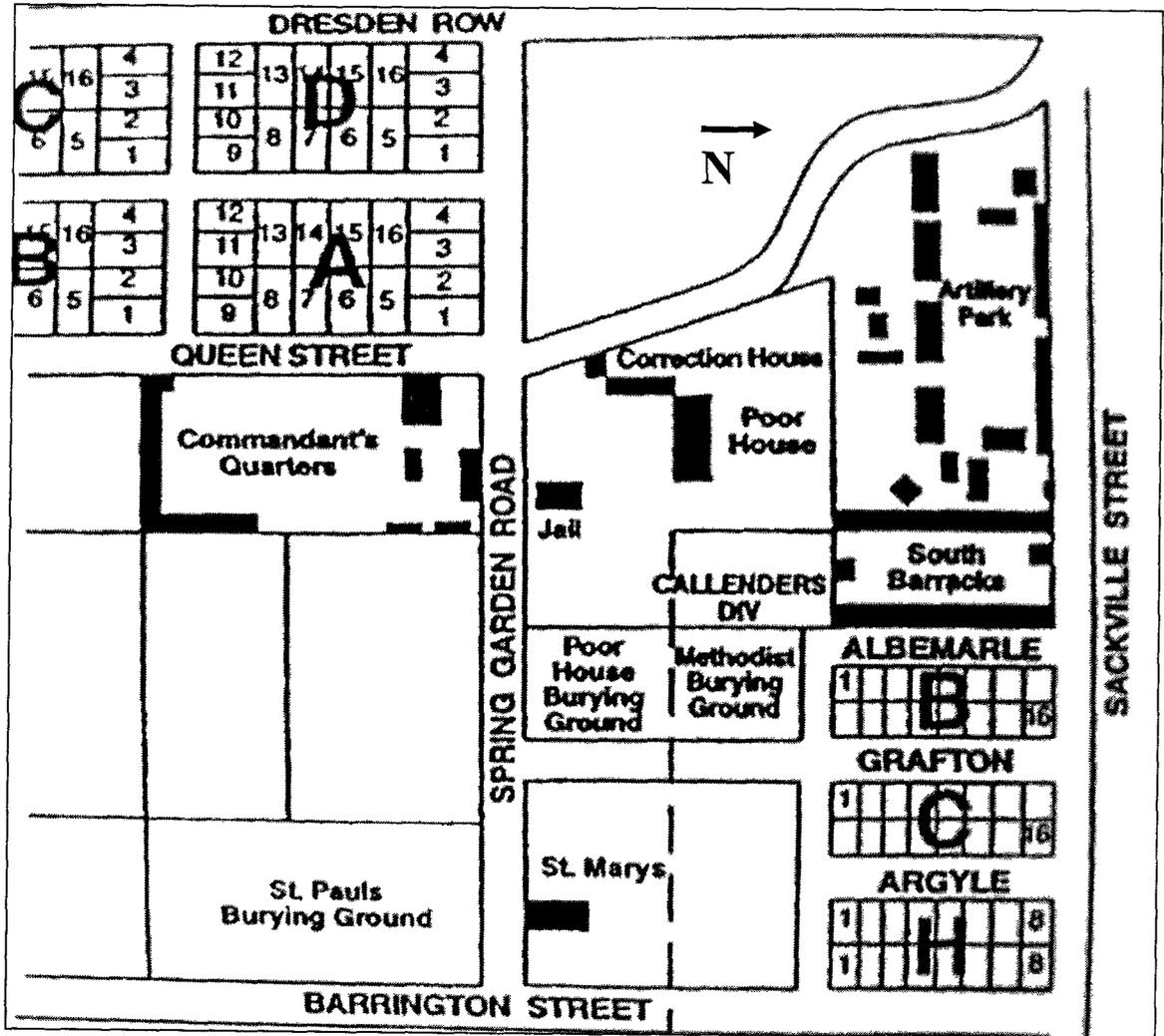


Figure 2 The 1830 Plan of the Town of Halifax, including the North and South Suburbs, illustrating the workhouse, Correction House, the Poor House and the Jail (Reproduced with the permission of NSARM).

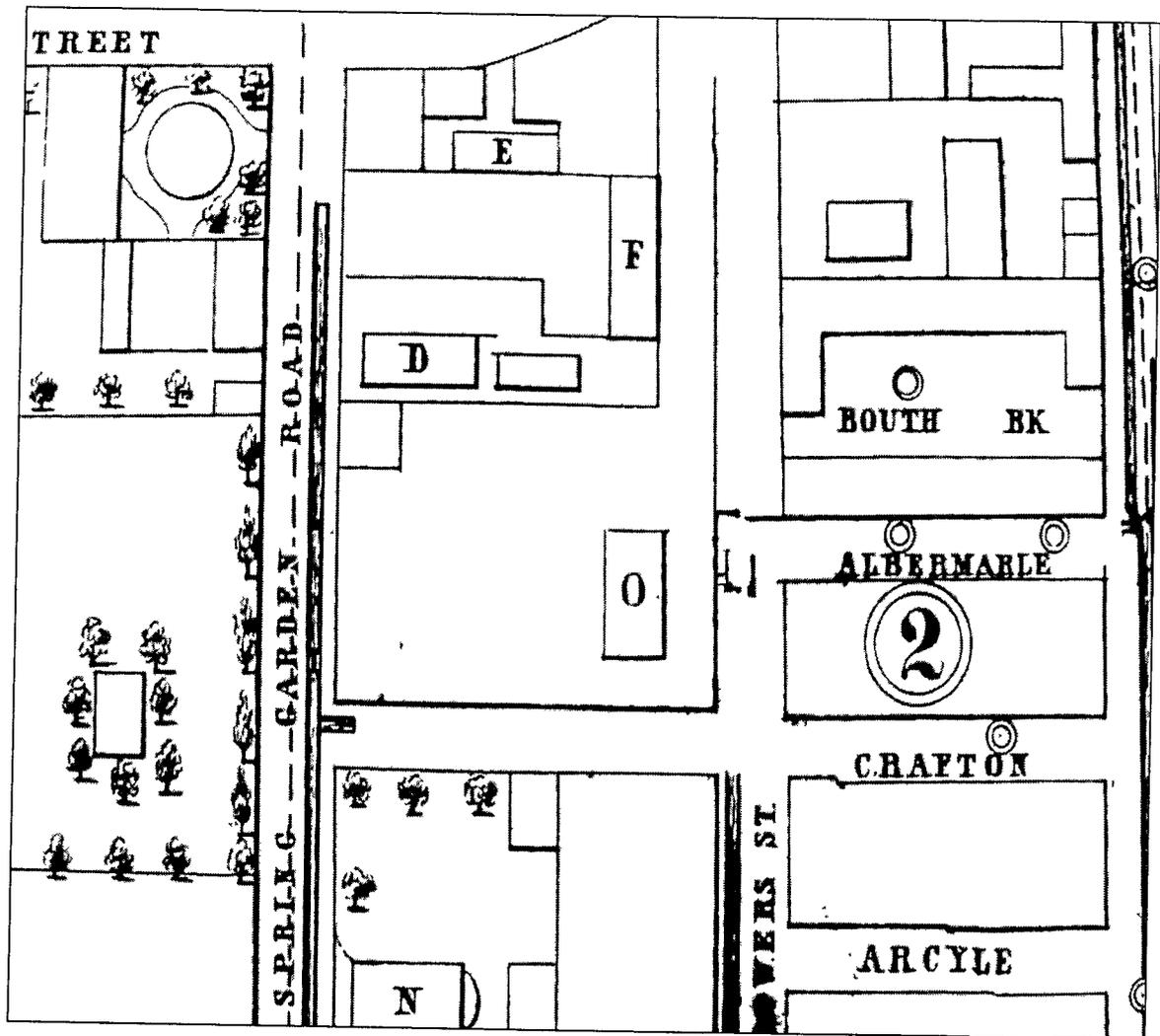


Figure 3. Plan of the City of Halifax, December 1851 (Reproduced with the permission of NSARM).

Legend:

- E - Correction House
- F - Poor House
- D - Jail
- O - Methodist Church

Revenues incurred by the poor house were primarily obtained through four sources. Annually, the provincial treasury issued a grant to support the transient poor and the poorhouse establishment. From 1834 to 1849, £600 was granted to the Commissioners

of the Poor to help transients, while another £25 was granted to the poor house school. In 1850, the grant for the transient poor was increased to £1,350. These grants do not include monies given to various townships of the province requesting financial aid.¹⁹ In Nova Scotia, the act of imposing a duty on goods, wares and merchandise imported from the United States of America, legislated that goods imported from the United States were subject to a ten percent import duty and subsequently, the money went to help financially support the poor house.²⁰ An undated letter addressed to the Commissioners of the Poor from the Province stated that the “Duties imposed on Live Stock, Apples, Onions, Fruit, Biscuit, and Bread, imported from the United States of American, at the Port of Halifax, shall be, and they are hereby authorized, to pay the sum due for building the Stone Wall round the Poor House Burying Ground.”²¹

As inmates of the poor house, they were fully expected to contribute to their subsistence through hard labor. Certain tasks that aided the institution to function were assigned to inmates, such as nursing the sick and stoking the furnaces.²² As previously stated, various industries were established on the poor house grounds in an attempt to generate revenue for the institution. Milk from the livestock not only supplied the poorhouse, but was also sold in the community; in 1840, £40 from milk sold was added to the poor house’s revenues. Vegetables were grown and sold in markets, adding another

¹⁹ Saunders 75.

²⁰ Saunders 74; Twohig 335.

²¹ NSARM V6/240–1762 (letter attached to a map “Lands Adjoining or Near the Governor’s Farm, Spring Garden Road”).

²² Fingard 54. According to Katz, “patients did a great deal of routine work around poorhouses. They not only nursed other patients and gardened but also often cooked, cleaned, sewed, and did other domestic jobs. In fact, in some ways the patients ran the larger poorhouses, as in Philadelphia, where they greatly outnumbered the paid staff” (123).

£50.²³ An advertisement for sale of Palm Leaf hats made by the inmates was to appear in two local morning newspapers in 1848.²⁴

It appears from the archival records that the manufacturing of coffins proved to be a significant source of revenue for the institution, supplying coffins for the use of the town, the Cholera Hospital, the Richmond and Melville Island Hospitals, Dartmouth Hospital, Waterloo Hospital, the Bank Head Hospital, as well as the City Home.²⁵ In the account books recorded on October 21, 1827, the sum of £15.s5 was received by the poorhouse for 61 coffins supplied to the Bank Head Hospital.²⁶ In August 1834, 101 large coffins and 15 small coffins were made and sold to the town of Halifax and the cholera hospital bringing in a revenue of £32.s16.d6.²⁷ Another £13.s0.d0 was received in December 1847 for 26 coffins supplied to the Richmond and Melville Island Hospitals.²⁸

Interestingly, though inmates were employed to manufacture coffins for the town and local hospitals, they were also fabricating their own final resting place. In 1827 when the smallpox epidemic spread through the poor house killing 116 men, 67 women, and 64 children, 247 coffins were made for the dead of the institution.²⁹ Such bleak work was not an uncommon task for inmates. The inmates of the Saint John County almshouse in New Brunswick “performed the grim tasks at the Dead House – making coffins, shrouds and

²³ Marble, *Physicians* 201-209.

²⁴ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 173, “Record Book, 1840-1860, 7 June 1848.”

²⁵ The inmates of the poor house manufactured coffins for the use of the town, the Cholera Hospital, the Richmond and Melville Island Hospitals, Dartmouth Hospital, Waterloo Hospital (NSARM RG25, series C, vol. 5, “Record Book, 1829-1860”), the Bank Head Hospital (NSARM MG100, vol. 156, #30-30a., reel #15198), as well as the City Home (HRM Archives 102-96.1, “Charities, 1895-1912.”)

²⁶ NSARM MG100, vol. 156, no. 30.

²⁷ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 108, “Record Book, 1829-1839, 7 November 1834.”

²⁸ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 165, “Record Book, 1840-1860, 7 January 1848.”

²⁹ NSARM MG100, vol. 156, no. 30a (Reel #15198) It is probable that coffin making was a common labour for poor house inmates, particularly in North America (Ely 854; Whalen, “Last Resort.”).

interring unclaimed bodies of almshouse inmates and others.”³⁰ Though no record of Halifax poor house inmates interring the dead was found, one may linger on the assumption that their duties were similar to those of neighboring provinces.

Despite being overcrowded, the Commissioners of the Poor were constantly inundated with admission requests.³¹ During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the number of individuals who found refuge in the Spring Garden Road poor house increased dramatically from 71 inmates in 1779; 282 in 1809; 775 from 1828-1831; 692 in 1841 and 850 in 1850. In a memorial to His Excellency from the Commissioners of the Poor, it was stated that the increase in expenditures in 1827 was largely due to the 441 Irish emigrants who were ordered to the poor house due to their sickly and diseased state, being infected with small pox, fever and diarrhea. That same year saw 340 town paupers admitted to the poor house, with another 899 admitted being the transient poor.³² Wards were extremely crowded, as “many inmates had to sleep on the floor or ‘two to a bed with one in the middle’.”³³ In 1840, when a ship carrying passengers infected with typhus arrived in Halifax sought refuge at the poor house, the Commissioners of the Poor refused as the house was filled to capacity.³⁴

With the increase of paupers seeking refuge in the poor house, the issue of limited space was an ever-growing concern. Throughout the historical record, countless entries are made regarding the need for more buildings to accommodate the number of inmates.³⁵

³⁰ Whalen, “Last resort.”

³¹ Saunders 95.

³² NSARM MG100, vol. 156, #30-30a.

³³ Pryke 43.

³⁴ Pryke 53.

³⁵ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 285, “Record Book, 1840-1860, 16 September 1851” - “The Poores Asylum is also clean and well kept, but the Jury are impressed that there is not sufficient room for the

In a letter submitted to the House of Assembly in 1842, the Commissioners of the Poor stated:

They have personally examined into the state of the Poors' and Lunatic Asylum, and found, that although the best disposition of the inmates has been made, there is not sufficient room in these establishments for the unfortunate individuals, who it has been found necessary to place there.³⁶

Again, in a letter written to the Mayor and City Council in 1860, the Commissioners of the Poor requested that the vacant property adjoining the poor house be granted to them, emphasizing that the additional accommodations to the poor house would allow them to provide greater comfort and promote healthier living for the inmates.³⁷ The problem of overcrowding at the Spring Garden Road poor house was not alleviated until the first South Street poor house was established in 1869.

Reports of the conditions in the poor house remain conflicting. In response to a petition from members of the city, a Committee was organized to visit the poor house and report their findings to the House of Assembly. Though only a few examples were provided, the overcrowded and unhealthy nature of the poor house was clearly described in the following passages:

In one garret, situate[d] over the Ward for lunatics, in which there is an average of 29 patients, there are 18 beds nearly in contact with each other, in which 47 persons are nightly crowded. In each of two or three rooms, 35 feet by 20, there are 24 beds, and about double that number of persons. In one Ward called the Hospital, there are 18 men and two boys, all sick and confined to the room, most of them in their beds. The total absence of all classifications of diseases, is one of the distressing circumstances connected with the establishment; some were dying of mere old age, others

present number of inmates. A true copy. James P. Clark, Clerk of the Peace"; a petition sent to the Honourable of the House of Assembly from the Commissioners of the Poor requesting the need for a bigger or more buildings (319).

³⁶ NSARM. Nova Scotia, *Journal*, minutes of 1842, App. No. 73b.

³⁷ NSARM. RG25, series C, vol 5, 443, "Record Book, 1840-1860, 25 February 1860."

of consumption, some were laboring under general debility, and others with local ailments; this want of classification is often attended with serious consequence to the unfortunate inmates, in one case a man came to be cured of an ulcer and caught Typhus Fever...At present there is absence of all comfort and all means of cleanliness. A provision for bathing ought never to be wanting in such an institution, but, in its present overcrowded state, any suitable arrangements for this purpose are, perhaps, impracticable...³⁸

On occasion, letters would be submitted to local newspapers from former inmates or visitors to the poorhouse, offering a glimpse as to its conditions: one gentleman was “impressed that the hospital appeared to be ‘clean and tidy,’ although he was disappointed that the diet seemed to be somewhat limited and consisted of “Indian meal porridge and molasses three times as day with a little tea without milk;” however, he would later retract his comment and state that the poor house was in fact “a wretched and insufficient establishment for the sick;” another stated it was “the best managed public institution in this town;” one gentleman while visiting his father-in-law in the poor house, found the poor house to be “clean, with good food, and a good bed.”³⁹

Recorded in the 1842 Journal of the House of Assembly, the Commissioners of the Poor for the City of Halifax “found both these Asylums (Poor’s and Lunatic’s Asylum) in excellent order, and the wants of the inmates appear to have been well attended to, with the exception of the want of more roomy and better ventilated apartments.”⁴⁰ However, given that the Commissioners of the Poor would have been seeking funds to uphold the poor house, some level of bias may have been attached to their description of the house. Aside from unscheduled visits to the poor house, of which

³⁸ NSARM Journal 1832, p. 164, appendix 49.

³⁹ Marble, *Physicians* 199.

⁴⁰ NSARM Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1842, App. No. 73b.

there is no report, there was always the possibility that discrepancies and abuses within the house were concealed before inspections occurred. As Saunders noted, “the only source of their information was from the keeper and he certainly would not reveal much information which was detrimental to himself or his masters. The inmates did not have a chance to tell everything.”⁴¹

During the early years of the workhouse/poor house’s operation, it not only served as a refuge for the disorderly, the poor, and the mentally and physically ill, but also as a civilian hospital. Due to the overcrowded nature of the institution, several attempts were made to establish a separate hospital where the sick could be cared for. Upon visiting the wards at the poor house in 1832 in response to a petition set forth by members of Halifax, the Committee recommended to Council that a separate hospital be constructed, “in order that, by separation, the healthy poor may be preserved from the contagion of the sick, and the sick from the unnecessary danger arising from being overcrowded by the healthy.”⁴² In 1840, another recommendation was made to Council to establish a permanent fever hospital, separate from the poor house, where individuals affected by contagious diseases could be kept instead of sending them to the poor house.⁴³ The close proximity of the lunatics ward also raised concerns that a separate building be erected to house those individuals, “many of them were allowed to roam hither and yon, but some were in fetters and that young children were brought up in such an atmosphere of poverty and insanity was very discouraging and pathetic.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Saunders 102.

⁴² Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1832, Appendix 49.

⁴³ Marble, *Physicians* 209.

⁴⁴ Saunders 100.

Therefore, in an effort to eliminate the negligent practices of medical attendance which some felt existed in the poor house, petitions that the poor house be open as a medical school began circulating, “for the benefit of all students in town and country, and for providing such checks that neither the paupers, nor diseased, can suffer from neglect or abuse.”⁴⁵ In addition, local doctors sought to “improve the professional competency of physicians in Halifax” by using the poor house as a medical college. Such a motive left the inmates to serve as teaching instruments.⁴⁶ In 1831, the Court of General Sessions of the Peace for Halifax recommended that the “Asylum be open to all physicians and surgeons in Halifax;”⁴⁷ however, despite such efforts, the poor house doors remained closed to Halifax’s medical practitioners. Those who fought so adamantly to have the poor house serve as a teaching hospital, began to shift their focus to the establishment of a general hospital in Halifax. Various petitions were submitted in the 1840s and 1850s, and finally, on March 31, 1855, “an Act for the Erection of a General Hospital in the City of Halifax” was passed.⁴⁸

In 1863, a report completed by Dr. Alexander Forrest, chair of the Medical Society of Nova Scotia, recommended that a separate hospital be established and concluded that the high mortality rate of the poor house was due to overcrowding and poor ventilation; it being the only civilian hospital in Halifax until 1867 when the City Hospital was established. Based on this report, Dr. Charles Tupper further recommended that the poor house on Spring Garden Road be closed and a new poor house be erected

⁴⁵ Saunders 102; NSARM Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1832, 164 (Reel #3523); Marble, *Physicians* 229.

⁴⁶ Pryke 46.

⁴⁷ Marble, *Physicians* 202.

⁴⁸ Marble, *Physicians* 249.

adjacent to the City Hospital on the South Commons.⁴⁹ Though an exact date of closure was not found in the archival records, the minute book of the Commissioners of the Hospital and Poor's Asylum indicates that as of November 30, 1869, "the New Pooors' Asylum is now finished and ready for occupation and it is expected that if the weather permits, the Old Building will be vacated next month."⁵⁰ Shortly after its closure, the poor house grounds and corresponding buildings were purchased by J. D. Nash; having demolished the buildings, the grounds were then divided into sixteen lots and were to be sold at auction.⁵¹ On April 5th, 1870, an advertisement in the *Acadian Recorder* announced the auction of the lots was to be held at noon the following day. Thus, after a century of serving the poor, the story of the poor house on Spring Garden came to a close.⁵²

The South Street Poor Houses

On April 17, 1867 an advertisement was placed in the *Acadian Recorder*, calling for tenders for "the erection of a brick building, on the South Common, for the accommodation of the inmates of the Poor's Asylum."⁵³ The poor house, which stood as the highest building in Halifax during this period, was situated between Morris and South Street, and in the vicinity of the City Hospital.⁵⁴ Its function was that of a multi-purpose institution:

A noble monument to charity and benevolence...it was a combination of an old-age home, an asylum for poor families, a minor hospital, a refuge

⁴⁹ Marble, *Physicians* 211.

⁵⁰ HRM Archives 102-95, 146, "Commissioners of the Hospital and Poor's Asylum minutes, 1866-1878, 30 November 1869."

⁵¹ Marble, *Physicians* 217.

⁵² *Acadian Recorder* [Halifax] 5 April, 1870, p. 3, col. 7.

⁵³ "Contract for Building," *Acadian Recorder* [Halifax] 17 April, 1867, p. 3, col. 1.

⁵⁴ Phyllis R. Blakeley, *Glimpses of Halifax* (Halifax: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, 1949) 79.

for the mentally and physically disabled, and a place for inebriates. The latter group defined the place for too many, although most were mentally ill.⁵⁵

The poor house was to be constructed under the direction of Henry Peters and based on plans by the architect, David Sterling, who had designed the institution in the form of a Latin cross, with four wings extending from a central building which measured 180 feet long, 50 feet wide, and four stories high.⁵⁶ Though it originally was meant to house over 1200 individuals, at the time of its construction, it was felt that the number of poor in the city of Halifax did not warrant such a large institution. Therefore, only the central building along with the East, South, and West wings were to be constructed, large enough to house 600 people comfortably.

Completed in December 1869, the poor house became a new refuge for the poor who would soon be transferred from the institution on Spring Garden Road.⁵⁷ However, the South Street poor house would be short-lived, for on the night of November 6, 1882, a fire spread through the institution, killing thirty-one people (Figure 4). Up until that time period, no other fire in Halifax had claimed as many lives as this one had.⁵⁸ According to the Citizen and Evening Chronicle, the scene was a horrific one: "Far above the roar of flames and crack of bursting slates were heard the cries of the wretched patients in the hospital, who were roasting to death. Most of them...were helpless, [and] could not leave their beds..."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Peter McGuigan, *Historic South End Halifax* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2007) 160.

⁵⁶ "Proposed New Poor's Asylum," *Novascotian* [Halifax] 28 January, 1867, p. 5, col. 3.

⁵⁷ Blakeley 79.

⁵⁸ NSARM, "Ruins of Poor House burnt Nov. 7, 1882,"

<http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/halifax/exhibit.asp?ID=45>.

⁵⁹ *The Citizen and Evening Chronicle* [Halifax] 7 November, 1882, p. 3, col. 2.

Following the Coroner's Inquest, it was determined that the fire originated in the kitchen area of the institution and spread through the ceilings to the walls and the elevator, and then from the elevator shaft to the rest of the building.⁶⁰ Leaving the poor homeless, temporary shelters were created in the barns and workshops on the property that had not been damaged in the fire.⁶¹ Later, the inmates were taken to the abandoned penitentiary on the North West Arm of Halifax, while others found shelter from friends and relatives. They would remain at their temporary abodes until 1886 when a second poor house was erected upon the burnt ruins of their previous home.⁶²

Under the direction of Lieutenant Middleman of the Royal Engineers, the ruins of the poor house on South Street were 'blown down' on December 16, 1884.⁶³ Atop the ruins, a new poor house was constructed, implementing the plans designed by Henry F. Busch, which included provisions "made for [the] separation of the sexes and immunity from fires."⁶⁴ With accommodations large enough to house over 500 inmates, the new poor house's estimated cost of construction was over seventy thousand dollars (Figure 5).⁶⁵ Recorded in minutes of the Assembly, it was recommended that the new poor house be built atop the ruins of its predecessor as:

all the outbuildings likely to be required are there, intact; the comparatively great expense of new sewage which would have to be made if the new building were located elsewhere, will be saved; a portion of the old walls can be utilized; and much of the material already on the ground can be used to advantage.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Blakeley 82-83.

⁶¹ NSARM Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1883, Appendix 3B.

⁶² McGuigan 161.

⁶³ "Blowing down the Poor House," *Acadian Recorder* [Halifax] 31 December, 1884, p. 3, col. 3.

⁶⁴ "The new poor house," *Citizen and Evening Chronicle* [Halifax] 17 March, 1883, p. 3, col. 2.

⁶⁵ Blakeley 84.

⁶⁶ Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1883, Appendix 3B, p. 4.

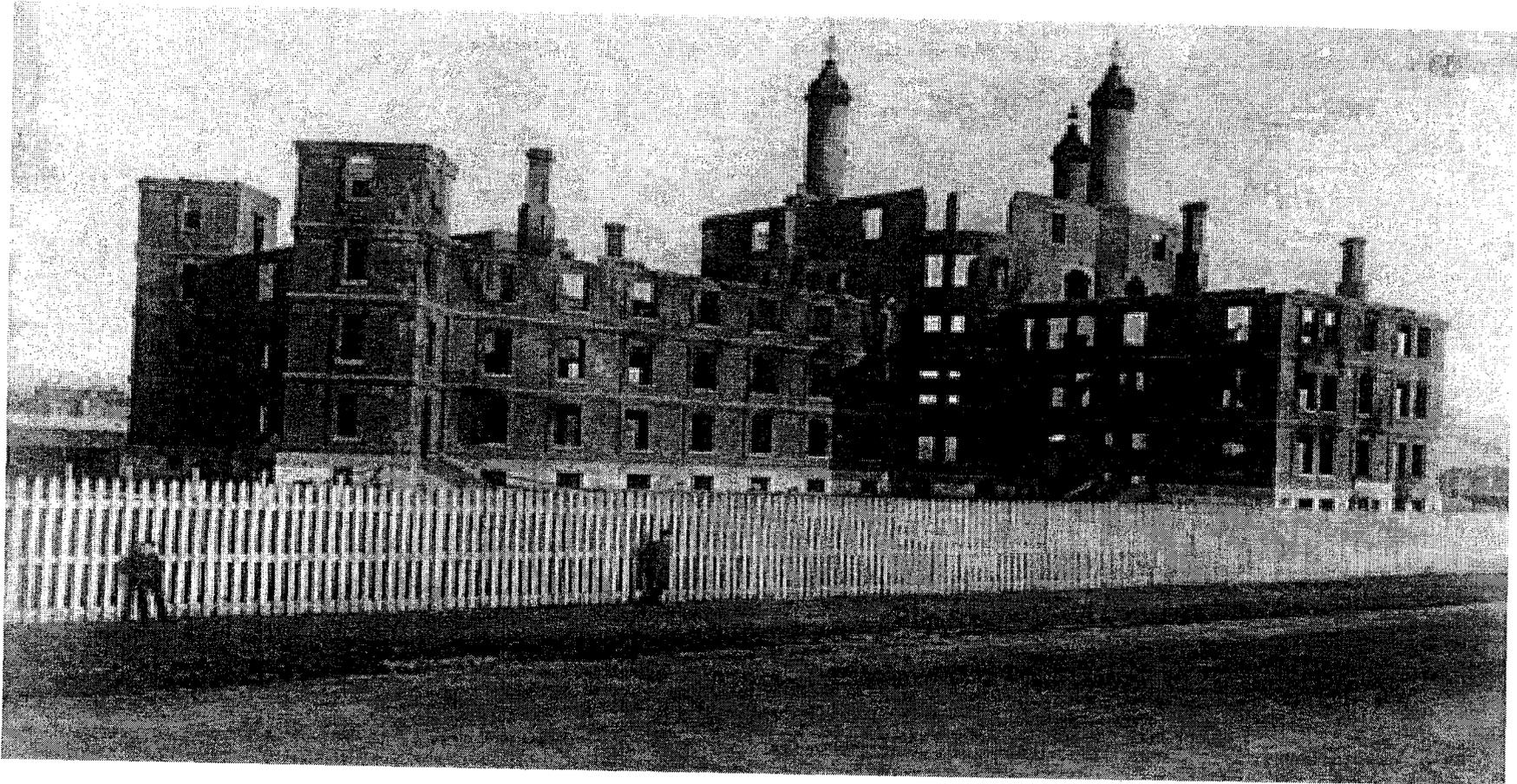


Figure 4. Ruins of the first poor house on South Street, destroyed on November 6, 1882. Though the shell of the institution is all that remained, the monumental appearance of this institution cannot be denied. A second poor house of similar magnitude would be later erected on the same site in 1886 (Reproduced with the permission of NSARM, "Ruins of Poor House burnt Nov. 7, 1882," <http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/halifax/exhibit.asp?ID=45>).



Figure 5. A new poor house was built on South Street 1886, atop the ruins of the first poor house (Reproduced with the permission of NSARM, "Concrete Sewer Blocks made at the Halifax Poor Asylum, Halifax, N.S., 1899," <http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/halifax/exhibit.asp?ID=45>).

Taking into consideration the cartographer's evaluation of the landscape and what was important to include in drawings, the *Panoramic View of the City of Halifax in 1879* shows the poor house institution, the outbuildings and the City Hospital (Figure 6). The 1914 Fire Insurance plan offers a closer look as to what precisely was located on the poor house grounds (Figure 7).

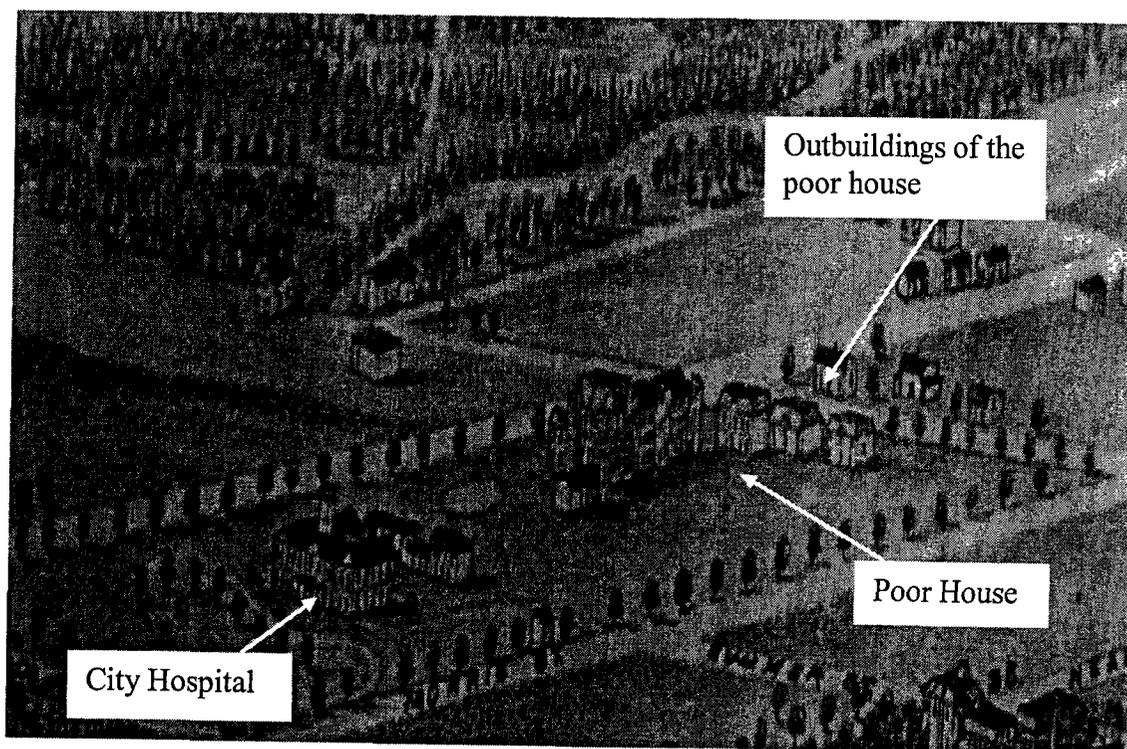


Figure 6. The poor house, along with its outbuildings, is shown here in an 1879 drawing (Reproduced with the permission of NSARM, *Panoramic View of the City of Halifax, 1879*).

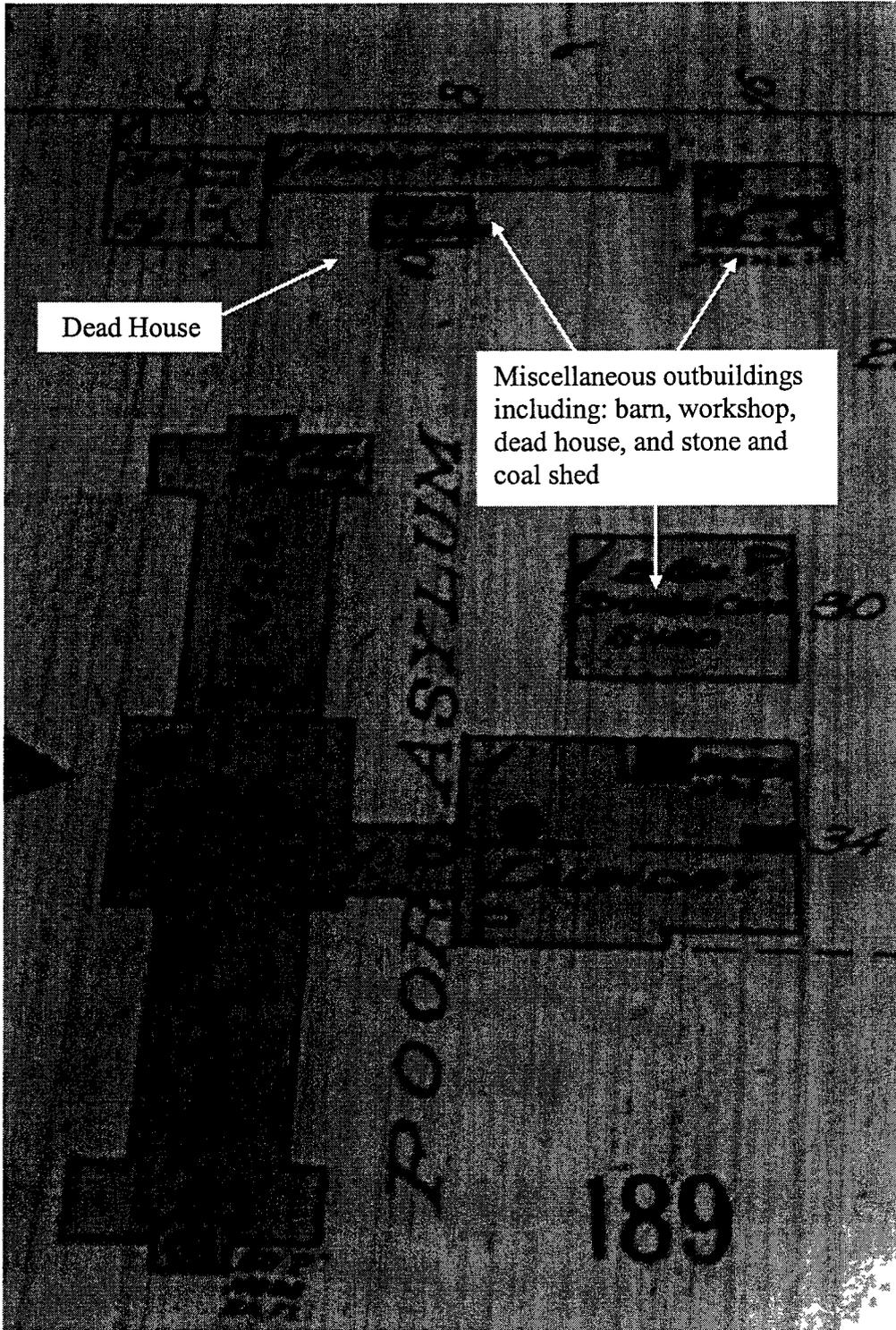


Figure 7. The Poor's Asylum, along with its various outbuildings; the dead house is indicated by the red arrow (Reproduced with the permission of NSARM, Fire Insurance Map, 1914).

Considered a poor district under the Poor Relief Act, the City of Halifax was required to provide support to every poor and destitute person who either claimed settlement within the City or were applying for temporary relief. It appears initially that no person was denied admission to the poor house, having met the admission protocol listed below, until overcrowding became an unhealthy burden upon the residents.

Recorded in the 1907 Halifax City Charter,²³⁰ the protocol for admission into the poor house, now referred to as the City Home,²³¹ involved the following process:

The superintendent or his assistant shall personally examine all person applying for admission, note and cause to be recorded in the admission book such facts in regard to them as are important to be preserved, such record to be made not later than twenty-four hours after admission of such person, shall cause each person to be thoroughly cleansed, and the clothing on the person to be examined, and if the clothing is not clean the same shall be taken off and cleansed, then if found suitable the same clothing to be put on again. Persons so applying shall be suitably classified, having reference to their age, condition and general character, placing those who require medical treatment in the hospital wards, and the insane in the insane wards, there to be examined by the doctor. The superintendent shall be especially careful that the infirm, sick and insane inmates are treated with considerate care and kindness (Ordinance 10, pt. 9).²³²

Once admitted to the poor house, inmates who were physically able were expected to work. Referring to the aforementioned 1752 memorial presented to Council by the Justices of the Peace of Halifax to establish a workhouse, it was expected that inmates would “pay for their subsistence...by picking oakum, and making Netts for the

²³⁰ The 1885 Halifax City Charter did not include the admission protocol to the poorhouse; the admission protocol, along with other descriptions of life in the poor house (ie. work, discipline, leisure, etc.) were first mentioned in the City Charter of 1907.

²³¹ HRM Archives 102-96.1, 294, “Charities Committee Minutes, 2 January 1907.” In 1906, a request was made by the Local Council of Women that the name of the South Street Poor’s Asylum be renamed the City Home. The following year, the Charities Committee adopted the motion to recommend to City Council that the Poor’s Asylum received its new name.

²³² 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 9.

Fishery.”²³³ An inmate’s day began with the rising bell ringing at 5:30 a.m. (from April to October; 6 a.m. from October to April) and ended with the retiring bell ringing at 8:30 p.m. (from April to October, 8 p.m. from October to April). By 7:30 a.m. inmates began their work day, breaking from 11:30 to 1p.m., and ending their workday at 5 p.m., Saturdays being a day of labour for male inmates only when special circumstances called for it.²³⁴

Several of the abovementioned industries that were in place at the Spring Garden Road poorhouse were also in operation at the South Street poor houses. In 1907, a profit of \$13.47 was reported for the bread sold to the City Prison,²³⁵ while as late as 1912, the minutes of the Charities Committee reports materials ordered for the production of coffins.²³⁶ However, it is uncertain whether the inmates continued the task of manufacturing coffins for use outside the poor house. In 1895, when a request was made by one of the regiments for coffins, the superintendent of the poor house was instructed not to grant them their request.²³⁷ Yet, a request for coffin handles, gross coffin studs and name plates was made by the superintendent in 1912.²³⁸

In certain cases, inmates were compensated for their services. According to point 7 under Ordinance 10 (Poor’s Asylum) of the City Charter:

In each ward-room or workshop, one of the inmates shall be designated by the superintendent or matron as ward or work overseer, who shall carry out the instructions of the superintendent or matron; and the committee shall

²³³ Marble, *Surgeons* 74.

²³⁴ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 32. Once more, the 1885 Halifax City Charter does not indicate work schedules or guidelines for the inmates within the poor house.

²³⁵ HRM Archives, 102-96.1, 309, “Charities, 14 August 1907.”

²³⁶ HRM Archives, 102-96.1, 490, “Charities, 4 September 1912.”

²³⁷ HRM Archives, 102-96.1, 15, “Charities, 6 November 1895.”

²³⁸ HRM Archives, 102-96.1, 490, “Charities, 4 September 1912.”

have power to fix compensation to be paid any inmate for services rendered.”²³⁹

Mrs. Rachael Cochrane, an inmate of the poor house for twenty-five years, was also a nurse in the Women’s Ward, paid two dollars a month to care for the sick.²⁴⁰ In an attempt to retain control and eradicate idleness, all inmates were carefully monitored by those employed at the poor house with regard to their ability to work. Any inmate refusing to work due to illness was examined by the doctor who then notified the Superintendent of the inmate’s ability to work. Women were not exempt from the work involved in the poor house and were assigned by the Matron “such labor as in her judgment they are best fitted to perform, subject to the approval of the doctor.”²⁴¹

It is uncertain whether the disciplinary practices of the poor house keepers differed significantly from those listed in the Halifax City Charter Ordinances. While the 1907 City Charter stated that “in all cases of discipline or restraint a record shall be kept of the cause and duration of the same”²⁴² and that “the Superintendent shall keep a record of all cases of discipline, which shall be open for examination to the Board,”²⁴³ no record of disciplinary action was found on the part of the poor house management in the historical record. Such records would prove useful in determining whether management followed the Ordinances set out in the City Charter.

Depending on the offence, it was permitted that discipline be extended to the diet, labor, restraint, confinement or discharge of an inmate.²⁴⁴ Though no distinction of

²³⁹ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 7. No record of monetary value was found.

²⁴⁰ Blakeley 83.

²⁴¹ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 17.

²⁴² 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 44.

²⁴³ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 10.

²⁴⁴ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 44.

punishment was observed in the historical records relating to the age or sex of an inmate, it was stated in the Charter that “insane inmates shall be treated in a kind and gentle manner, but subject to strict discipline; sympathy and kindness shall be the rule, force and restraint the exception.”²⁴⁵ Referring to ‘paupers of depraved character’ located in the black hospital, the Commissioners of the Poor recommended:

they cannot at present suggest any satisfactory plan for subjecting these persons to constant labour, but they would strongly recommend that they should be kept on low diet, which while it would tend to assist in the eradication of their disease, might at the same time also be considered by them in the nature of punishment.²⁴⁶

Interestingly, Ordinance 10 also stated that “No attendant shall strike an inmate under any circumstances.”²⁴⁷ Perhaps a more humane form of discipline was practiced in the South Street poor house when one remembers the whipping post included in Mr. Josiah Marshall’s building plans for the proposed workhouse on Spring Garden Road.²⁴⁸ However, whether or not this whipping post was used solely for the prisoners kept in the jail adjacent to the poor house or for the disobedient poor house inmates, no mention was found in the minutes of the Commissioners of the Poor.

Certain cases of disobedience were dealt with more severely than others. Inmates found intoxicated while in the poor house, returning intoxicated after a leave of absence from the poor house or guilty of unruly behaviour while in the institution faced the possibility of a month’s imprisonment in Rockhead Prison.²⁴⁹ Inmates also lost the privilege of leaving the institution for a period of three months in cases when they

²⁴⁵ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 38.

²⁴⁶ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 146, “Record Book, 1829-1839, 17 November 1835.”

²⁴⁷ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 38.

²⁴⁸ Atkins 50; Raddall 55.

²⁴⁹ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 45. Imprisonment was imposed by the stipendiary magistrate on conviction of the offence under the Summary Convictions Act.

returned to the institution intoxicated after a leave of absence.²⁵⁰ The management of the poor house also exercised discipline over the visitors; anyone found bringing liquor into the institution or giving it to any inmate “forfeit[ed] his right of admission to the institution, and shall not be allowed that privilege again, except by the special permission of the Committee.”²⁵¹

As a constant reminder to the poor house inmates of the rules expected to be followed, each room and ward in the institution held a copy of the rules, and punishment awaited anyone, whether inmate or employee, who vandalized those posted rules.²⁵² It is somewhat interesting that rules did not apply solely to the inmates. As stated in point 37 of the ordinance, “every officer or employee of the institution shall avoid the use of improper language, and shall treat each other and the inmates with courtesy, and any violation of this regulation shall be sufficient cause for dismissal.”²⁵³ One must wonder if employees were held accountable for their actions, should they have misused their authority in any way.

Inmates were not able to come and go as they pleased from the poor house; however, they were permitted to leave the institution, with permission from the Superintendent, once a month as long as they had been obedient and had broken no rules.²⁵⁴ Yet, it appears that inmates still had ample opportunity to visit with family and friends. According to the City Charter, “inmates may be visited by their friends every Sunday, Tuesday and Friday, between the hours of 1 and 4 o’clock, but in urgent cases

²⁵⁰ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 35.

²⁵¹ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 34.

²⁵² 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pg. 46.

²⁵³ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 37.

²⁵⁴ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 35.

they may visit any day of the week, by obtaining an order from a member of the Committee.”²⁵⁵ Except for Sunday visitations, it is unclear how inmates were permitted to visit with family and friends and still perform the work they were assigned to.

Based on the historical records, it appears that great emphasis was placed on religion. Unless excused by the Superintendent, the attendance of religious services every Sunday was mandatory for all inmates, and they were voluntarily permitted to attend any service during the week so long as they returned to work when the service ended.²⁵⁶ In addition, respecting that the inmates may follow different denominations, the Commissioners of the Poor enlisted the clerical services of the Evangelical Alliance, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Church of England.²⁵⁷ The religious interest of poor house children were also considered for in the minutes of December 7th, 1849, a motion was passed that “the children of the institution attend Sunday School, at their respective places of worship.”²⁵⁸ However, the issue of non-religious inmates is not addressed in the 1907 Charter: whether or not they were forced or exempt from attending religious services is unknown.

Attempts were made by the Commissioners to provide some level of enjoyment for the poor house inmates. When funds and rations permitted, holidays were observed and celebrated. In the Commissioners’ minute book, it was recorded that a Christmas dinner consisting of roast beef and plum pudding was served to mark the special day.²⁵⁹ In 1905, the Natal Day Committee had allowed sixty dollars to the Charities Committee

²⁵⁵ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 34.

²⁵⁶ 1907 Halifax City Charter, Ordinance 10, pt. 36.

²⁵⁷ HRM Archives. 102-96.1, 64, “Charities, 6 July 1898.”

²⁵⁸ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 225, “Record Book, 1840-1860, 7 December 1849.”

²⁵⁹ HRM Archives. 102-96.1, 201, “Charities.”

in order to provide a special Natal Day supper for the poor house inmates.²⁶⁰ On occasion, the poor house inmates were entertained by the local talent as suggestive in the 1904 minutes whereby the Charities Committee secretary was instructed to send a letter to the Bandmaster of the Artillery and St. Patrick's Band thanking them for the concert they provided to the inmates.²⁶¹ Measures for entertaining the poor house children were also sought when Mr. Charles Twining, Esq., a Commissioner of the Halifax Poor Asylum, requested that a playground be constructed for the children and "the Board feeling the necessity of such a measure requested, Mr. Twining to take charge of that department that with the assistance of Mr. Shields some provision would be made to accomplish so desirable a purpose."²⁶²

Though the South Street poor house remained part of the Halifax landscape until its demolition in 1972, the influence invoked by the poor house's service to the city and province's marginalized population was duly noted by Dr. Clyde Marshall in his survey of the City Home:

[The Halifax City Home] has had a long and not altogether honourable history, but it may justly lay claim to the fact that it is the father of two other important institutions, the Nova Scotia Hospital in Dartmouth, and the Victoria General Hospital in its own city."²⁶³

Over the course of its history, pressure slowly began to ease off the poor house as specialized institutions were established, such as the City Hospital in 1859 (later named

²⁶⁰ HRM Archives. 102-96.1, 255, "Charities, 15 June 1905."

²⁶¹ HRM Archives 102-96.1, 225, "Charities, 6 September 1904."

²⁶² NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 451, "Record Book, 1840-1860, 7 May 1860."

²⁶³ HRM Archives, City of Halifax fonds, 1841-1996, series City Home records, 1838-1956, *Survey of Halifax City Home - 1951*, 11-12. According to Wagner in his own study on the development of poorhouses throughout the United States, he notes that "the poorhouse is important because many other major institutional settings in America grew out of it: the mental asylum; the prison and penitentiary; the orphanage; the state school for the "feeble minded" (later the retarded); the nursing, old age, and boarding home; homes for unmarried women; and even, in many cases, medical hospitals" (3).

the Victoria General Hospital) and the Mount Hope Insane Asylum in 1858 (later named the Nova Scotia Hospital). Societal reforms, implemented in the first part of the twentieth century, such as the Nova Scotia Old Age Pension Act, Unemployment Insurance Act, Mothers Allowance Act, Family Allowances, among others, further alleviated the number of individuals seeking refuge in the poor house.²⁶⁴

In 1971, the last 165 patients of the City Home were transferred to the new Abbie Lane Memorial Hospital, leaving “the grim and dreary Halifax Mental Hospital [the City Home] empty for the first time since 1886.”²⁶⁵ Though no date was found during my research to indicate when the poor house ceased operations, an unreferenced index card at the NSARM states, “Old Poor House on South Street being demolished; to be part of Children’s Hospital grounds. Mental patients have been moved to Abbie Lane Memorial Hospital. Dated March 1972.”²⁶⁶ In his book, McGuigan has noted that “the Poor House stayed, unwanted and unloved, for almost sixty more years until it was demolished in 1972.”²⁶⁷ Thus, as the inmates moved on to another chapter in their lives, the story of the South Street poor house came to an end.

²⁶⁴ Senior Scribes 25-28.

²⁶⁵ Brenda Large, “Decrepit Halifax Mental Hospital Closed After 85 Years,” *The 4th Estate* [Halifax] 26 August, 1971: 1.

²⁶⁶ NSARM, Card Catalogue, Places, Drawer #3.

²⁶⁷ McGuigan 162.

5 ~ *A Pauper's Grave*

Until the mid-eighteenth century, very little attention was given to the pauper funeral; however, as the century neared its end, attitudes toward death were such that “the dead deserved the respect betokened by elaborate, well attended funerals, well situated graves, and large tombstones.”¹ As a consequence, the poor person’s funeral came to be viewed as “the final stamp of failure.”² As Laqueur described,

In a world of this sort, where public standing had become intimately linked with the importance one had earned in the eyes of one’s fellow men, no man’s reputation could be finally assured until the moment of his death. For the rich and successful, for those with social ties, the funeral could be anticipated with equanimity. Not so for the poor and friendless; it haunted them as the specter of failure.³

Such degradation and humiliation associated with a pauper’s funeral and burial meant that poor persons did all they could to avoid it. Some of the poor, desperate to afford the fees, voluntarily went without certain necessities in life in order to purchase a proper burial in death.⁴ Sadly, the financial burden involved in paying for funeral and burial expenses was overly daunting for some, as police reporter Jacob Riis wrote of New York in 1890; “infants were often buried in anonymous paupers’ graves, or, in cases of extreme poverty, abandoned. Seventy-two dead babies were picked up in the streets last year. Some of them were doubtless put out by very poor parents to save funeral expenses.”⁵

¹ S. J. Kleinberg, “Death and the Working Class,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 11.1 (1977): 202.

² Laqueur 120.

³ Laqueur 109.

⁴ Laqueur 110; Julie-Marie Strange, “Death and Dying: Old Themes and New Directions,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 35.3 (2000): 497.

⁵ Vincent DiGirolamo, “Newsboy Funerals: Tales of Sorrow and Solidarity in Urban America,” *Journal of Social History* 36.1 (2002): 9.

By the mid- to late-nineteenth century, friendly societies, burial clubs, and collection societies were booming with men, women, and children who had secured for themselves a proper 'send off' for a "weekly premium of a few pence per head."⁶ Yet, the disgrace of a pauper's funeral and burial was not feared by all as one gentleman recounted his disdain for burial insurance:

A pauper grave wouldn't trouble me... Come to think of it you can let my burial insurance lapse here and now and let's be having the pennies every week. If I sup it away in beer it'll be one in the eye for those insurance robbers [and] the right man will have benefited."⁷

Indeed, that this gentleman owned burial insurance in the first place may have been a sign of his underlying fears of a pauper's death. "Viewed as parvenus whose vanity led them to try to surpass their station in life," poor citizens often saved up their money in life to guarantee themselves a large burial plot and monument in death.⁸

In many instances, in an effort to maintain a respectable burial for their loved one, a pauper would be buried in a common grave until such time that their family had gathered enough funds to have them exhumed and reburied in a proper grave. A written request submitted by Joseph Makin to the Bolton burial board in Lancashire in 1886 stated, "I Joseph Makin not being in circumstances when we buried my son Robert Makin

⁶ Laqueur 110.

⁷ Strange 173. In Canada, the purpose of the Memorial Society Association of Canada, formed in 1971, was "to promote the formation of non-profit memorial societies in Canada and to promote dignity and simplicity in funeral rites" (York University Archives and Special Collections, *Inventory of the Memorial Society Association of Canada fonds*, 5 April 2002, accessed 14 May 2011, <<http://archivesfa.library.yorku.ca/fonds/ON00370-f0000355.htm>>). Initiated by a group of fifty-five parishioners in Vancouver, the Memorial Society of British Columbia is the oldest memorial society in the country, with a current membership of over 200,000 (Memorial Society of British Columbia, *A Brief History*, 2006-2011, accessed 14 May 2011, <<http://www.memorialsocietybc.org/c/about.html>>). Though such societies exist in almost every province in Canada, in 2008 when the Memorial Society Association of Nova Scotia was established, it was the only such society in the Atlantic Provinces. However, according to the society's wikispace, they are not accepting new members at this time (Memorial Society of Nova Scotia, accessed 14 May 2011, <<http://memorialsocietynovascotia.wikispaces.com/>>).

⁸ James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1980) 125.

to purches [sic] a new grave but having purched [sic] one since hopes that it lies in your power to get Him removed from common grave to purched [sic] grave...we will be very thankfull [sic] for your kindness.” However, as Strange explained, this method largely failed to override the initial shame of a pauper’s burial on two accounts: first, the community would not forget that the deceased’s original burial was that of a common grave and second, reinterment of the dead typically took place during the night.⁹

In the nineteenth century, a respectable and decent burial was closely associated with the purchase of a private grave and full mourning customs, such as laying out the dead, viewing the corpse, and funeral processions, all of which were unavailable to the pauper through the New Poor Law of 1834; “stripped of all mourning paraphernalia, the pauper coffin bore little or no indication of the individual personality of the corpse or those who mourned it.¹⁰ Under the New Poor Law, the pauper funeral held great potential for shame:

In London, that part of the burial service carried out inside the church was omitted for the pauper dead if their relatives couldn’t come up with the required fee. Unions were authorized by new legislation to purchase special burial grounds solely for paupers who died in the workhouses of the new regime. It was routine in London and other big cities for several pauper funerals to be combined, thus giving the poor no choice as to when their relatives or friends were to be buried and creating through the display of identical unmarked parish coffins a striking image of anonymity and individual worthlessness.¹¹

As the New Poor Law reflected cost-saving techniques, a pauper’s funeral and burial was scant. As Richardson recounts,

⁹ Strange, “Only a Pauper” 150. As Strange noted, “the pauper grave did carry a social stigma and many families would do their utmost to avoid that fate for any one of their members, either by pawning their possessions, contributing to burial insurance schemes or applying to the Home Office to have a pauper corpse exhumed and re-interred in a private burial plot (Strange, “Death and Dying” 497).

¹⁰ Strange, “Only a Pauper” 149.

¹¹ Laqueur 122.

In the Victorian period, shrouds were often lacking altogether, and the poor person buried naked, wrapped only in paper, or with a strip of calico stretched over the body. Coffins were of the cheapest possible materials and standards of workmanship, made of the thinnest wood, often unplanned, and with a layer of sawdust instead of a lining. Relatives were offered no last look, and no say in when or where burial should take place. The journey to the burial ground was hasty and careless. Pauper graves were dug in land attached to the workhouse itself, or in the most neglected parts of local grounds. The graves themselves could go twenty or more coffins deep, all generously treated with quicklime to hasten speedy re-use. No monument marked a pauper's grave, a number would invariably be the sole indication of the space in which generations of workhouse and parish poor would be laid.¹²

The stigma attached to a poor house death was sometimes too great for family members to bear; not for the disgrace it brought to the deceased, but for the shame it brought upon them. When a man decided to take his father to the Lewiston City Farm as a threat that he would leave him behind, Mrs. Landry, the matron of the Farm, said "You are welcome to [leave your father here], but let me tell you something, if they die here, it is going to be in the [news]paper that he died at the City Farm and [that] you could have very well afforded to take care of him." With a guilty conscious, the man left with his father in tow.¹³

The events from death to burial for a poor house inmate are rather vague, as few details have been found from other similar institutions in Canada or abroad. However, fragments of the events can be used to piece together the story, as best as possible.

Whether or not an inquest into the death of an inmate was typical for all social institutions, such as poorhouses, is uncertain; however, when John Miller died in 1864 at

¹² Richardson 273; According to Hurren, "Poor people were usually buried in the cheaper northern sections of churchyards, and graves were marked with a wooden cross" ("A Pauper Dead-House: The Expansion of the Cambridge Anatomical Teaching School under the late-Victorian Poor Law, 1870-1914," *Medical History* 48 (2004): 80).

¹³ Wagner 29.

the Blockley almshouse in Pennsylvania, an autopsy was performed.¹⁴ From the late nineteenth century, many of the deceased inmates of the Toronto Hospital for the Insane were autopsied at the asylum mortuary. During this time period, consent from kin was required and by 1933, all mental hospitals in Ontario were required to have consent from both next of kin and the district crown attorney. Issued by the province, a standard report was to be filed out upon discharge or death of an inmate, documenting the “external physical appearance of [the] dead person as well as the items and disposal of [the] departed person’s belongings.” Examples such as “Very thin in a wasted condition”... “‘Good’ and ‘None’ in reference to her physical condition and indication of bruises”... “Body very thin: left hand and right elbow had been bitten by the rats the preceding night: slight discoloration there and above left eye,” are found within the autopsy reports.¹⁵

How dead inmates of the Toronto Hospital for the Insane were handled may be considered an appropriate comparison, given the limited records of such practices at the Halifax poor houses. As Reaume described:

Hospital employees were under strict instructions to treat the bodies of the dead respectfully and were responsible for washing the bodies of deceased inmates as well as dressing them in clean bed-gowns or shirts. Undertakers who were in any way disrespectful to ‘even a pauper patient’s body’ were to be dismissed at once.¹⁶

¹⁴ Rosenberg 118. At the Blockley almshouse in Pennsylvania, the practice of “morbid anatomy” allowed the Paris-trained clinician William Gerhard to distinguish the pathological difference between typhus and typhoid fevers in 1836-1837 (Rosenberg 139).

¹⁵ Reaume, 239

¹⁶ Reaume 242.

Though protocol dictated that next of kin be notified, in such instances when the body was left unclaimed, the inmate was buried by the institution in unmarked graves.¹⁷

Typically, before their bodies were laid to rest, the poor house dead were housed on a temporary basis in cemetery dead houses while awaiting transportation or burial. As Strange recounted, bodies of workhouse inmates in late Victorian and Edwardian England were kept in the workhouse mortuary until time of burial.¹⁸ The body would then be placed in the cheapest possible coffin and buried in an unmarked grave, “into which several coffins might be placed on the same occasion.”¹⁹ Few examples have been found of inmates being commemorated with a grave marker, but they do exist. In the town of Etna, New Hampshire, the minutes of the Town Poor Farm indicate dozens of paupers buried in unmarked graves, with the exception of one; Sally Dugat, a mentally ill woman, who spent nearly thirty years during the winter at the poor farm.²⁰ In one particular case at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, a marked grave was requested by the institution for inmate, Marcia B., as telegrams notifying the deceased kin were returned and the hospital wanted to be assured that should the family come forth at a later date to claim their kin, they would be able to locate her in the cemetery.²¹

When John Clarke died in 1907 in the Stourbridge Union workhouse, a Notice of Death was sent to his family, who were permitted to remove his body from the house and

¹⁷ Reaume 232 & 242.

¹⁸ Strange, “Only a Pauper” 150.

¹⁹ Peter Higginbotham, “The Workhouse,” *Death in the Workhouse*, 14 June 2010, accessed 15 February 2011, < <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/life/death.shtml> >.

²⁰ Lynn Rainville, “Hanover Deathscapes: Mortuary Variability in New Hampshire, 1770-1920,” *Ethnohistory* 46.3 (1999): 566. The inscription on her stone read: “In the midst of society she lived alone – beneath the mockery of cheerfulness – she hid deep woes in the ruin of her intellect – the kindness of her hart [*sic*] survived – she perished in the snow in the night of ...1854 age 69.”

²¹ Reaume 242.

organize the funeral, themselves, if funds were available (Figure 8).²² Alternatively, many inmates found their final abode in the local cemetery or burial ground, of which many were part of England's workhouse properties,²³ either because family and friends were unable to afford the burial expenses or simply because no kin came forth to claim them.²⁴ Consequently, left in the hands of Poor Law authorities, a dead pauper was destined, "to be put away on the parish" and cause "the survivor's family to bear a 'life-long stigma.'" ²⁵

Forgettable and undistinguished are terms that can easily be associated with an inmate's death in an English workhouse during the nineteenth century. Communal pauper funerals were a common occurrence in the workhouse where "one service catered for all the pauper burials taking place that day"²⁶ and the observation of the appropriate denominational burial rites was largely irrelevant. The British workhouse, St. Pancras Guardians, held burials twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, where the dead of that particular day were buried in the same grave.²⁷

Though families were notified upon the death of their kin, that some inmates were buried without any mourners to witness their passing was a sad reality; Warren S., an inmate at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane was buried after 28 years of confinement

²² Higginbotham, "The Workhouse." At the Portland Almshouse, as it was in many other poor houses, it was customary that family and friends were permitted to remove their dead kin and bury them at their own expense; otherwise, the pauper would be buried "in the ground which now is or may hereafter be laid out for that purpose" (Wagner 44).

²³ Higginbotham, "The Workhouse."

²⁴ Hurren 69, 80.

²⁵ Laqueur 109.

²⁶ Strange, "Only a Pauper" 165.

²⁷ Kenneth V. Iserson, *Death to Dust: What Happens to Dead Bodies?* 2nd ed. (Tucson: Galen Press, 2001): 620.

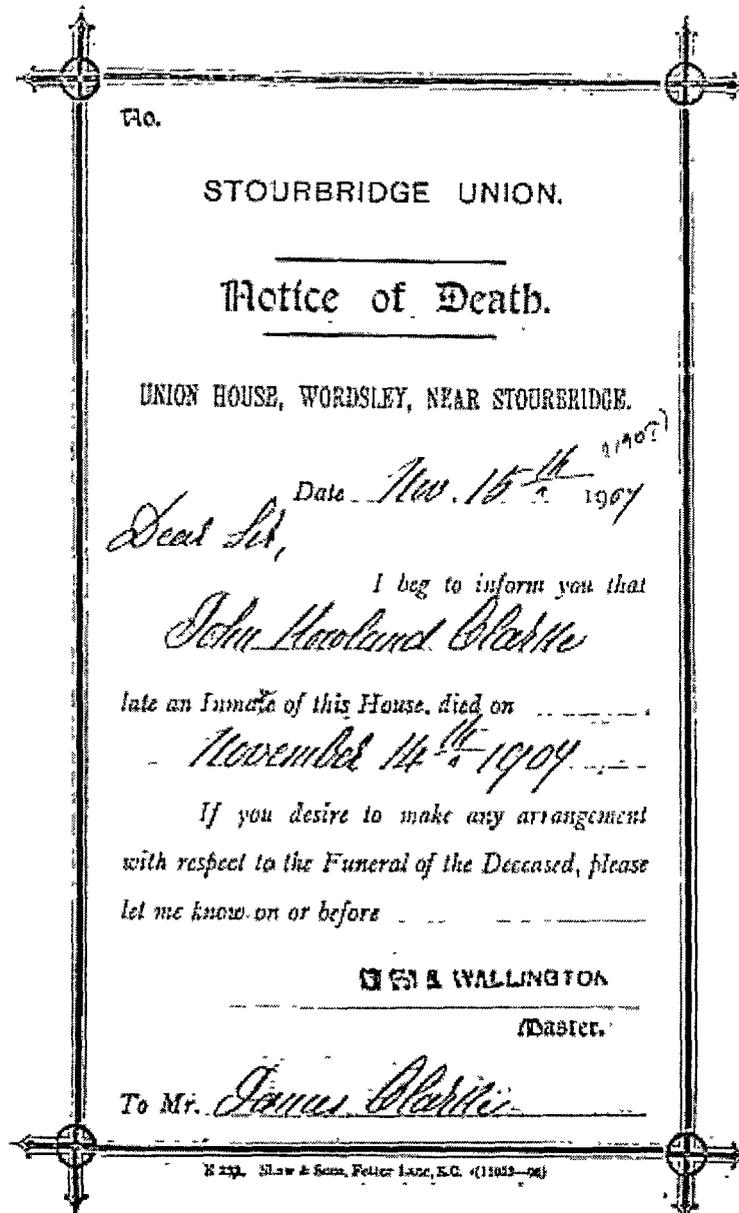


Figure 8. Notice of death of John Clarke from the Stourbridge Union (Reproduced with the permission of Higginbotham, "The Workhouse," <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/life/death.shtml>).

without a single relative or friend to stand over his grave.²⁸ While on occasion, some inmates were buried without the appropriate clergy officiating or received their burial

²⁸ Geoffrey Reaume, *Remembrance of Patients Past: Patient Life at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, 1870-1940* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000): 241.

rites days after their interment, others were buried without any minister whatsoever. Upon his death at the Wigan workhouse in England, Edward Edwards' burial service was performed by the caretaker of the cemetery as the minister assigned to officiate over his death neglected to show up.²⁹

The sorrowful disregard which enveloped a pauper's funeral did not end upon the service's completion, but rather followed him to his place of burial. "Packed like sardines into graves which resembled a sand pit," paupers were interred in the cheapest, most obscure, portions of the churchyard³⁰ since:

Prior to the sanitation regulations of the late 1840s, private cemeteries could sell to the poor as many places in a common grave as the depth of the shaft would allow; paupers paid for on contract by the parish or Poor Law Union mingled helter skelter with the non-pauper poor who in the nineteenth century England had to buy their final resting place. Three coffins wide, twelve deep, they were stacked."³¹

During the nineteenth century in urban North America, divisions based on class, gender and biological affinity gravely affected the treatment of the dead. While preparation of the body at home, transportation to the grave site, and interment or entombment in a designated place was the basic pattern for most deceased, these features were often denied to the urban poor.³² Instead, a pauper's death was "reduced to matters of expediency, sanitation, and social responsibility;" the dead pauper was carted away to

²⁹ Strange, "Only a Pauper" 165.

³⁰ Strange, "Only a Pauper" 159.

³¹ Laqueur, "Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals" 116. In Uxbridge, Massachusetts, the unworthy poor were buried in mass pauper graves, if they were not used as cadavers for the Dartmouth Medical School (Rainville 566).

³² Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven, NY: Yale U, 1996): 39.

the nearest potter's field³³ or public square at the city's expense and buried anonymously with "other perceived deviants and outsiders," such as criminals, strangers, and blacks.³⁴

It was during this same period that burial space was customarily associated with the urban churchyard;³⁵ however, "problems of overcrowding, sanitation, and the unsightly character of graveyards within the city [led] to a reinterpretation of the relationship between the living and the dead."³⁶ By the mid-nineteenth century, a move to a more rural burial space was developing; the rural cemetery municipally owned and operated, and situated at the town's limits, became the popular destination for the dead. Similar developments were put into practice in Halifax by the passing of the 1833 act, An Act concerning Cemeteries or Burial Grounds for the Town of Halifax, which called for the discontinuation of burials within the Town or Suburbs of Halifax and the development of a common public cemetery outside the town's limits.³⁷

The burial location of the poor served only to reaffirm the subordinate lot they held in life as they were most often relegated to potter's fields, public squares, or sections of the cemetery unwanted by those of higher status.³⁸ In post-medieval English churches and churchyards where social status was paramount, "the well-to-do were buried in the sunnier south side of the churchyard, vying for space in the prestigious section immediately outside the south door where their gravestones would be seen by every

³³ A term first used in the Old Testament, a potter's field was a burial place for "the poor and otherwise unwanted bodies" (Iserson 618).

³⁴ Gary Laderman, "Locating the Dead: A Cultural History of Death in the Antebellum, Anglo-Protestant Communities of the Northeast," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63.1 (1995): 35.

³⁵ Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963): 123.

³⁶ Laderman, *The Sacred Remains* 44.

³⁷ John Whidden and James F. Gray, Esquires 1835 Chapter XXXII. The Statutes of the Province of Nova Scotia, Volume 4, p. 207-211.

³⁸ Laderman, *The Sacred Remains* 42.

churchgoer. The poor were buried on the darker, north side of the churchyard, an area associated in folklore with evil and the devil.”³⁹ Similar actions were practiced when an order was passed by the Boston Board of Health in 1810, calling for the segregation of “‘undesirables,’ including African Americans, the poor, and criminals, requir[ing] their own delineated space outside of the area reserved for the more ‘respectable’ members of the urban community.”⁴⁰ Within Halifax’s first public cemetery, Camp Hill, two sections were devoted to the burial of paupers and one section reserved for African Nova Scotians. Such divisions would remain in practice until 1888, after which time, “paupers were given any available plot in the cemetery.”⁴¹

Seldom was equal treatment bestowed upon the rich and poor in death; however, the relevance of social status held very little weight when epidemics struck as “the extreme conditions brought on by an epidemic warranted pragmatic and rational action, and this often superseded privileged treatment based on class standing.”⁴² As Laderman recounted of nineteenth century epidemics in America:

Rich and poor alike died on the streets, in their homes, at cholera hospitals, and often alone. In these circumstances the dead bodies did not receive any special treatment, nor were they intimately cared for by the living. Instead, they were frequently piled on wagons and hearses and directly transported to potter’s fields. Here they were deposited in anonymous, collective pits and covered with earth and sometimes quicklime.⁴³

³⁹ Pearson 14.

⁴⁰ Laderman, *The Sacred Remains* 48.

⁴¹ April D. Mitchell, “An Anthropological Analysis of Burial Practices in Halifax between 1749 and 1833 as Reflected in Two Halifax Parishes,” Undergraduate thesis, Saint Mary’s U, 1999, 38.

⁴² Laderman, *The Sacred Remains* 41.

⁴³ Laderman, *The Sacred Remains* 41.

Though some members of the upper class could indeed secure for themselves a burial plot in the local churchyard, it appears that epidemics held the lowest members of society on an equal footing with the upper class, even if that footing did mean a foot in the grave.

Under the London Poor Law Union, a pauper was fixed with a plain pine coffin, “ribbed only on the lid, made of the cheapest pine, specifically to be only 3/8” thick on the sides, 1/2” on the lid, 5/8” on the ends for small coffins; somewhat thicker all around for the bigger ones.” The most common “extra” that paupers sought to add to their coffin was the name plate, “with name inscribed costing 2s 6d – desirable despite, or perhaps because, the body was headed for the anonymity of a common grave.”⁴⁴ For some, name plates would have offered a level of dignity in death, claiming respect and identity for the deceased.⁴⁵

Recorded in the *Liverpool Echo*, a cemetery guardian remarked that “the pauper coffins commissioned by the union [were] a ‘perfect disgrace’: ‘their quality was so poor that they cracked when a nail was driven in, and unless bodies [were] carefully handled, they f[e]ll out of them.’”⁴⁶ Unable to afford the luxuries enjoyed by the wealthy with their “vaults and private chapels, triple coffins (wood, lead, wood) and retinues of servants to guard their remains,” the pauper’s options were limited and humble, a pine box scarcely able to protect them from the damp earth surrounding them.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Laqueur 121, 114.

⁴⁵ Strange, “Only a Pauper” 168.

⁴⁶ Strange, “Only a Pauper” 162.

⁴⁷ Richardson 80. In Japan, the “coffin type was deemed the indicator of the splendor and status of the entire funeral,” with the poor being buried in the “lowest grade of coffin, a simple barrel known as *hayaoke* or *kan’oke*” (Yamada Shinya, “Funeral rites and changing perceptions of death in contemporary Japan,” *Mortality* 9.1 (2004): 29.

Thus, funerals came to define one's social status and those who were financially capable to partake in such extravagant measures were offered, for a price:

various permutations of coffin strength and durability, grave or vault size, security, commemoration, and funerary display...The early nineteenth-century undertaker provided those with adequate funds the prospect of rotting entire within a secure coffin, hermetically sealed from both the soil and the dust of less eminent corpses.⁴⁸

As a result, the "increasingly commercialized trappings of death"⁴⁹ led the way for a respectable funeral; one in which the pauper could scarcely conceive. Yet, for some, the inconsequential importance of an elaborate burial meant very little, for as poor as a pauper was, once dead and buried, they were one with the wealthy dead. Taken from a Devon tombstone, the following epitaph speaks volumes to this sentiment:

Here I lie by the chancel door;
They put me here because I was poor.
The further in, the more you pay,
But here I lie as snug as they.⁵⁰

On occasion, a pauper had more to fear than the cold damp earth awaiting them in their final repose. As hospital wards were commonly associated with poor houses, the advancement of medical teaching, particularly pathology, was an attractive incentive for ambitious physicians in the nineteenth century. Advancements in medicine during this time period depended greatly upon "an intimate knowledge of the body's structures;" consequently, this meant a greater demand for bodies to fulfill this intellectual desire, of which the pauper body was thought to be a most fitting subject.

⁴⁸ Richardson 272-273.

⁴⁹ Richardson 272.

⁵⁰ Pearson 124.

To some, “the diseased poor were thought especially suitable objects for medical teaching because only by allowing young physicians to learn on them could they repay society for its charity.”⁵¹ Specific to the workhouse dead, “the body was, in short, payment for society’s services in providing a roof under which to die.”⁵² Coincidentally, along with such attitudes toward the workhouse dead, those in authority believed that relatives forfeited their rights regarding the disposal of their dead kin since they had failed to provide for them during their life.⁵³ As a result, “dissection added a penumbra of fear to death on the parish – casting fundamental doubt upon the likelihood that any pauper would reach even the flimsy coffin and the unmarked grave.”⁵⁴

Perhaps for reasons less to do with a sincere concern for the dead poor and more as an attempt to evade the dissection table themselves, middle-class people during the 1860s “demand[ed] investigations into the causes of death of workhouse inmates.”⁵⁵ Recorded in the *Free Lance*, they stated “let the masters of our workhouses and the managers of our prisons do what they can to preserve us from this examination *post-mortem*. They can effect [*sic*] the object by taking care that the ‘unclaimed’ reach their proper and legitimate destination.”⁵⁶ Perhaps scenes of “monstrous births (animal and human) in bottles, the skeletons of freaks, a cast of the brain cavity of Dean Swift’s skull, death masks, murderer’s skeletons and relics, and all sorts and conditions of medical prodigies – feet, heads, internal organs – pickled or dyed to show their peculiarities to better effect” which lined the Hunterian Collection at the Royal College of Surgeons in

⁵¹ Laqueur 123.

⁵² Laqueur 124.

⁵³ Laqueur 124.

⁵⁴ Richardson 275.

⁵⁵ Richardson 279.

⁵⁶ Richardson 279.

London, had some effect on the middle-class image of dissection and their attempts to escape this fate.⁵⁷

Rampant overseas and in America in the nineteenth century, dead paupers and lunatics were favored by body snatchers, who roamed burial grounds, digging up corpses and selling them to anatomists for 2 to 14 guineas. Prior to the Anatomy Act of 1832, anatomists obtained bodies for dissection through two avenues: from the gallows, as “bodies of murderers [were] handed over to the anatomists as a post-mortem punishment”⁵⁸ and from the illegal work of body snatchers.⁵⁹ It may be that even in death, the poor were rated ‘second-best’ to dead criminals, as one historian commented, “the Bodies from the Hulks...[were] more prized at the Schools on account of their being for the most part young subjects and better adapted for the display of human structure than the aged inmates of the workhouses...”⁶⁰

The passing of the Anatomy Act in 1832 did little to reassure the dead pauper that their final repose would be left undisturbed, as their masters and keepers actively participated in the underground trade of cadavers for money. Family and friends had up to six weeks to claim the deceased; otherwise Poor Law and asylum authorities were permitted to recoup poor relief costs through selling the pauper’s cadaver to anatomical school for the advancement of medical science.⁶¹ When Frank Hyde, an inmate of England’s Yarmouth workhouse died in 1901, his coffin was buried, containing nothing but sand or sawdust. Meanwhile, by the greedy hands of the workhouse Master’s clerk

⁵⁷ Richardson 64.

⁵⁸ Richardson xv.

⁵⁹ Marble, *Pestilence* 47.

⁶⁰ Richardson 248.

⁶¹ Hurren 70.

who had staged a false funeral, Hyde's body was secretly sent by train to the Cambridge anatomical teaching school for dissection. The Master's clerk profited fifteen schillings and Hyde was buried almost a year later.⁶² What a disheartening fate when even death brought no solace.

At last, what fate awaited Halifax's poor house inmates in their death? Would the house surgeon or coroner perform an inquest on the dead inmate, anxiously seeking a medical explanation for their death? Would there be a long, sorrowful public procession following the inmate from his temporary home in the poor house to his eternal resting place in the cemetery? Would an elaborate feast of food and drink await the mourners after the deceased had been interred? Or would their death go relatively unnoticed, without as much as a communal funeral service, his body buried in the dead of the night without even a single mourner? The sequence of events beginning with an inmate's death and ending in their final repose is hidden well within the historical records for the Halifax poorhouses. The events, from death to burial, of the Spring Garden Road and South Street poor houses' inmates are described in the following section.

⁶² Hurren 69.

6 ~ *Treatment of Halifax's poor house dead*

The quality of persons seeking shelter, combined with the living conditions of the institution, allowed death to feature prominently in Halifax's poor houses. Consequently, the matter of where to keep the poor house dead until their burial must have been a significant issue. Though a dead house or morgue was not included in the building plans for the Spring Garden Road poor house, evidently one did exist upon the property. According to an article in the *Acadian Recorder* in 1872, purchased by a man named Crawley, the "old dead house on the former Poor House grounds," which measured 20 feet square, was removed from its original site and relocated to Richmond Station, where this gentleman worked and resided.¹ This is the sole instance where the term "dead house" was found in the historical records relating to the Spring Garden Road poor house, though discussions of maintaining the dead are frequent in the Commissioners of the Halifax Poor Asylum's minutes regarding this facility, leading one to believe that a dead house most certainly had to be part of the property.

When discussing the South Street poor houses, it appears that a dead house was not intended to be part of the institution's outbuildings. At a monthly meeting of the Commissioners held December 7th, 1869, it was resolved "that the several coroners of the City be immediately notified that at the New Asylum for the Poor there will be no accommodation for the reception of dead bodies on which inquests are to be held, in order that they may make the necessary arrangements for holding inquests elsewhere."² Two

¹ "A lively Dead House," *Acadian Recorder* [Halifax] 29 February, 1872: 2.

² HRM Archives 102-95, 147, "Minutes, 1866-1878, 7 December 1869."

years later, as a result of an unfortunate incident of a poor house inmate, a letter to the Editor in the *Acadian Recorder* was submitted to address the need of a dead house:

The need of a *dead house* is one of the greatest wants of the present time; the recent case of the unfortunate woman found dead in the field on the common, back of the stone shed, is a case in point, and speaks in language not to be misunderstood, to citizens generally and civic functionaries particularly, as to the necessity of such a place for the reception of any unfortunate, dead unknown stranger.³

The incident that provoked this response occurred just days before the above letter was printed in the newspaper, when the body of an elderly woman was found dead behind the stone shed on the Common...“scarcely covered by the few garments on her which bore the marks of the Poor Asylum. A bottle containing a small quantity of spirits by her side.” It was recorded that she left the institution on Wednesday, presumably “got into the field on Friday night while drunk, lay down to sleep, and perished in the cold.” As there was no dead house on the poor house property, the body was kept in the stone shed and the coroner, Dr. Jennings was notified. An inquest was held and the jury’s verdict concluded that “the deceased came to her death from the effects of exposure to the cold, probably while she was under the influence of liquor.” What happened next to the body is uncertain; “after the inquest had been held the stone shed was called up, and this morning the coroner notified the Mayor that the body should be buried, but as His Worship cannot see what he has to do with the matter, and no other official feels called upon to act, the remains continued in the shed uncared for.” The article gives no further details on the fate of this unfortunate woman.⁴

³ “Wanted – A Dead House,” *Acadian Recorder* [Halifax] 10 Nov. 1871: 2.

⁴ “Death from Intemperance and Exposure,” *Acadian Recorder* [Halifax] 6 Nov 1871: 2.

It appears that the above mentioned events provoked some conversation about whether or not a dead house should be established upon the property. In 1872, during a meeting of the Commissioners of the Hospital and Poor's Asylum, it was recorded that "after conversation respecting a Dead House, it was resolved that the chairman and commissioners of the month be a committee to wait on the government requesting them to have the necessary legislation effected in regard to it."⁵ No subsequent entry was found regarding this matter; however the 1895 Fire Insurance Plan does identify a dead house on the poor house ground (Figure 9).

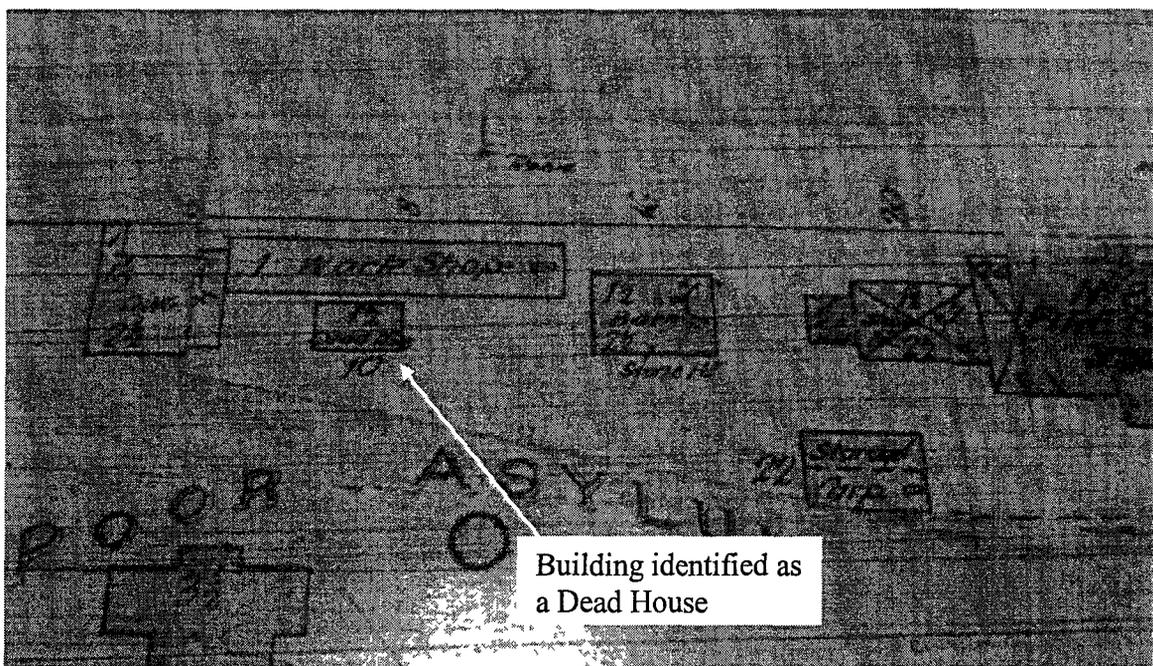


Figure 9. The 1895 Fire Insurance Plan of the area containing the South Street Poor House. A dead house is clearly marked as an outbuilding on the property (Reproduced with the permission of NSARM).

What is definite is that a suitable and relatively large space was undoubtedly required to house the dead, particularly in times of epidemics when the death toll soared.

⁵ HRM Archives 102-95, 207, "Minutes, 1866-1878, 7 February 1872."

As the following accounts of minutes from the Commissioners of the Halifax Poor Asylum indicate, not only was a shelter for the dead most certainly part of the Spring Garden Road poorhouse grounds, there is evidence that the poor house not only received and held inquests upon its own inmates, but also provided some of the county's dead with the same services.

Recorded in the monthly minutes for July 1857, inquests, coffins and burials were authorized by the Chairman of the Commissioners of the Pooors' Asylum upon application by the coroner to the keeper of the facility.⁶ In 1851, a claim was issued against Dr. William Grigor, the Coroner for the County, for coffins supplied by the poor house for the years 1848, 1849, and 1850. The keeper of the poor house was directed "not to supply any more coffins to the coroner or allow any inquests to be held at the Poor's Asylum" until the account was paid.⁷ However, those directions do not seem to have been followed since in 1855, another claim of £18.17.6 was issued against Dr. Grigor for coffins and burials for the years 1851, 1852, and 1853, as well as an outstanding amount for 1854 and 1855.

This resolution appeared to have been maintained for some time. In 1857, Dr. Edward Jennings was instructed by the Commissioners of the Pooors' Asylum that should he "expect any accommodation at that establishment as Coroner, [he] must submit to the same terms and conditions as the late Mr. Gray and Dr. Grigor;" meaning should he require the use of the institution to hold an inquest, a coffin, and interment for the deceased, he would be required to submit an application to the keeper of the poor house

⁶ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 394, "Record Book, 1840-1860, 8 July 1857."

⁷ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 286, "Record Book, 1840-1860, 7 November 1851."

and pay twenty shillings for each interment, to be paid before the body is received into the institution.⁸

That bodies of non-poor house inmates were brought into the institution and inquests performed upon them is evident by Dr. Almon's announcement to the Board in May 1855 of a particular case when:

A body [was] brought into the asylum by the direction of the coroner in a state of decomposition and kept there for the period of twenty four hours...Stating that such an occurrence might be highly prejudicial to the health of the establishment, [it] was therefore resolved that the Chairman communicate to the coroner that in future no inquests will be allowed to be held at the Poor House except in cases that may occur there.⁹

Such a statement is extremely significant. Aside from informing the researcher that bodies of non-poor house inmates were received and inquests held, it indicates that the cause of death of an inmate was thought to be important enough to be investigated by the coroner. The underlying reason for an inquest remain uncertain, particularly given the fact that many paupers had no kin to come forth to claim their body, let alone seek the cause of death. In an age where the opportunity to enhance medical knowledge was paramount, poor house inmates of the mid-nineteenth century and onward may have simply served as prime teaching instruments to physicians. As Daniel Clark, Superintendent of the Toronto Hospital for the Insane commented in 1887, "more autopsies were needed as too much 'material' was allowed to 'go to waste' without contributing to medical knowledge."¹⁰

⁸ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 394, "Record Book, 1840-1860, 8 July 1857."

⁹ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 354, "Record Book, 1840-1860, 7 May 1855."

¹⁰ Reaume 239.

During a monthly meeting of the Commissioners held at the office of the Poors' Asylum on March 7th, 1873, the first evidence of a regularly submitted report relating to deaths within the institution was conceived. Dr. Almon was instructed to submit a monthly report to the Commissioners, "embracing the state of the health of the inmates of the institution; and any deaths, with the probable cause thereof."¹¹ On February 20, 1881, in his Medical Report for the Poor's Asylum for the year ending December 31, 1880, submitted to the Chairman of Board of Public Charities, Dr. Almon recounted the following:

During the past year there were 61 deaths among the inmates being a decrease of 14 over the year 1879...It will be seen by the list of death annexed that the majority were caused by chronic and incurable diseases and the effects of natural decay or old age. This is not to be wondered when we consider the class of persons admitted to the Asylum and their previous habit of life.

Dr. Almon, MD.¹²

Attached to this letter are two sheets, one of men, one of women, listing the decease's name, age, and cause of death. Though incomplete, this is an example of what was submitted to the Commissioners:

Mary Hearn, 36, Senectus
Elizabeth Graham, 75, cancer uteri
Catherine Meagher, 85, pneumonia
Margaret Quinn, 79, paralysis
Mary Walsh, 68, Senile gangrene
Ellen Mansfield, 24, Tuberculosis Pulmin (pulmonary)
Elizabeth Bowden, 55, Dysenterry
James Dempsey, 30, Tuberculosis Pulmin (pulmonary)
Thomas Martin, 79, Brights Disease
James Haley, 87, Senectus

¹¹ HRM Archives 102-95, 208, "Minutes, 1866-1878, 7 March 1873."

¹² NSARM RG25, series C, vol 4-4a.

John Pense, 68, Cancer of Neck and Face
Peter Peterson, 21, Tuberculosis Pulmin (pulmonary)
Arthur Newton, 30, Killed by accident
William Mahar, 98, Senectus¹³

What the section above indicates is that inquests were held on both inmates and non-inmates of the institution. What it does not specify is whether or not all deceased inmates received an inquest, why inquests were held in the first place, why non-inmates were being brought to the poor house for inquests, and who these persons were. In addition, if all inmates received an inquest, in times of epidemics, it is certain that the space needed for the coroner to perform his duties would have been substantial to accommodate the large number of dead inmates. Evidence that coffins were built in anticipation of an inmate's death in times of epidemics may signify the lack of time or need for an inquest and that the main priority of the poor house management was to have the dead interred as quickly as possible.¹⁴ The expediency with which epidemic victims were buried during cholera outbreaks in the United States in the nineteenth century is described by the following scenes:

Rich and poor alike died on the streets, in their homes, at cholera hospitals, and often alone. In these circumstances the dead bodies did not receive any special treatment, nor were they intimately cared for by the living. Instead, they were frequently piled on wagons and hearses and directly transported to potter's fields. Here they were deposited in anonymous, collective pits and covered with earth and sometimes quicklime.¹⁵

Very little documentation appears to have been kept of burial practices during times of severe epidemics in Halifax. As Mitchell recounted, "in 1749, hundreds of

¹³ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 4-4a.

¹⁴ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 101, "Record Book, 1829-1839, 7 August 1834." As cholera swarmed through the poor house, infecting many of the inmates, it was resolved that twenty coffins be constructed to accommodate the dead and in anticipation of those that would follow.

¹⁵ Laderman, *The Sacred Remains* 41.

typhus victims were buried in the Old Burying Ground but few, if any, of those burials are recorded in burial registers for St. Paul's Church.¹⁶ It has been documented that those aboard the German ship, the *Ann*, who fell victim to typhus fever in 1749, were buried in a mass grave under the Little Dutch Church, "in 'simple canvas bags' and placed atop one another in an east – west alternating fashion. The grave was very shallow, just one foot deep and large rocks were placed over the bodies to prevent animals from disturbing the shallow remains."¹⁷ During the 1834 cholera outbreak, carts circulated the city every morning, collecting the dead who were buried at the Fort Massey Cemetery in a mass trench with quicklime.¹⁸

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as urban populations expanded, the ever-increasing need for additional burying space became insurmountable. So much so, that in some cases, old public graves were reopened to receive the newly departed. Written in 1892, an article in the *Porcupine* claimed that "despite the availability of an area of uncultivated land, cemetery employees had reopened public graves, 'broken up and trampled down' the coffins in them..."¹⁹ In North America, as well as overseas, "renting" or "leasing" a grave space is a common practice in which modern cemeteries will rent "a grave for 2 to 30 years [and] at the end of that period, disinter and rebury the bones in accordance with that country's cemetery laws."²⁰ Whether such burial practices were common at the Spring Garden Road poor house burying grounds is unknown; however, in a list of expenses for the Halifax Asylum for the poor in the year 1839, a

¹⁶ Mitchell 36.

¹⁷ Mitchell 36

¹⁸ Grant, "Historical Sketches," 17.5 (1938): 299.

¹⁹ Strange, "Only a Pauper" 159.

²⁰ Iserson 653.

charge of £36.8.2 was listed to pay “sundry truckmen for hauling earth to cover the Poor House Burial Ground.”²¹ No explanation was given of the need for extra soil.

Though attempts to legalize dissection were recorded in Nova Scotia once England’s Anatomy Act was passed in 1832, opposition to the legislation dictated that it would not be until 1870 that physicians were permitted to dissect cadavers legally for anatomical purposes, and as it was in England, Halifax poor house inmates became an acceptable source. In 1861, Dr. William B. Webster presented his appeal for the legalization of dissection to the House and noted, “that the bodies of persons dying in the Poor House, for instance, or elsewhere, who ha[ve] no friends or relatives to bury them, might be handed over under certain restrictions to members of the Medical Society.”²²

Whether poor house inmates feared the possibility of their body being snatched from their coffin or legally handed over as instruments of anatomical teaching, is unknown within the Halifax poor houses. However, it seems likely that such a fate awaited at least some of the poor house dead. Recorded in the minutes of the Halifax Medical College in 1882, when a discussion arose of a shortness of dissecting materials, it was thought that the probable explanation was “due to moving of [the] Pooors’ Asylum.”²³ The following year, the registrar of the Halifax Medical College was requested to contact the Warden of the Dorchester Penitentiary “in regards to bodies of persons dying in that institution being delivered up for dissection purposes.”²⁴ These entries seem to indicate that the dead of the first South Street poor house were given up for dissection; however,

²¹ NSARM Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1839-1840 app 34, pg. 716.

²² Marble, *Pestilence* 48.

²³ NSARM MG17 vol. 100, Halifax Medical College minutes, 28 Nov 1882, 201.

²⁴ NSARM MG17 vol. 100, Halifax Medical College minutes, 3 Nov 1883, 217.

whether inmates from the Spring Garden Road poor house or the second South Street poor house experienced similar methods of disposal is unknown. Upon his death on October 3, 1965, inmate Nicholas Grich, was charged to and buried by Dalhousie College's Anatomy Department.²⁵ However, Mr. Grich may have made prior arrangements regarding the disposal of his body.

In 1875, a special meeting of the Commissioners was held concerning Dr. Lindsay, house surgeon of the poor house, "for the purpose of investigating reports in connection with the management of the Hospital and more especially with reference to rumours of the removal of a body for anatomical purposes."²⁶ Few additional details were offered in the minutes as to the outcome of this investigation; however, what is known is that a public investigation was conducted, along with an investigation by the Commissioners; Dr. Lindsay was suspended pending said public investigation; a letter was sent to the Dean of Faculty of Medicine, "notifying him, that, in future it will be necessary that the terms of the Act, respecting the study of Anatomy, passed in 1870 be strictly adhered to in all of its particulars;" and finally, Dr. Lindsay resigned as house surgeon for the poor house in September 1875.²⁷ Evidence does not permit a firm link between Dr. Lindsay's resignation and the allegations against him.

Searching through coroner reports revealed little prior to the beginning of the 1900s; a century worth of coroner's inquests from 1828 to 1928 gives no mention at all of poor house inmates.²⁸ The physician's death certificates for the city of Halifax from 1894

²⁵ NSARM Cruikshank's burial registers.

²⁶ HRM Archives 102-95, 262, "Minutes, 1866-1878, 10 August 1875."

²⁷ HRM Archives 102-95, 262-267, "Minutes, 1866-1878."

²⁸ NSARM RG 41, vol. 8, "Halifax County Coroner's Inquest."

to 1906 provide information on one deceased inmate, Eliza Thomson, aged 67 years, who died on July 20th, 1906. Falling sick just four weeks before her death, her physician Dr. Thos. Trenaman signed her death certificate listing the cause of death as exhaustion following urosepsis. She was later buried in the Fairview Cemetery; the location of her grave has not been found.²⁹

By the 1910s, records become increasingly more detailed and helpful to the researcher. The City Home death registers after 1914 provide not only demographic information on the deceased, but the length of illness and cause of death as well: Thomas Stacey, died October 2, 1914, after suffering from stomach cancer for a year; Margaret McDonald, died on June 19, 1916 of bronchopneumonia and old age; John Gillis, died March 3, 1918 after suffering from cardiac disease (valvular asthma) for just “a few minutes.”³⁰ In addition, remarks such as “remains taken by J. Snow and Son; remains taken by Nova Scotia Undertaking Co.” begin to appear within the City Home registers after 1919.³¹ This indicates that the poor house no longer facilitated the burial of its residents.

According to Marble, inmates of the poor house became involved in the manufacturing of coffins around the time of the smallpox epidemic in 1827.³² Though the historical record offers no evidence of grave goods being interred along with the deceased, individual coffins were afforded to at least some, if not all, of the deceased inmates. Some level of preparation appears to have been established to handle deaths in

²⁹ HRM Archives, RG 35 102-28.E19 to 102-28.E24, City of Halifax – Physician’s Death Certificates (1894-1906).

³⁰ HRM Archives RG35, 102-33A 29, “City Home Registers.”

³¹ HRM Archives RG35, 102-33A 31a, “City Home Registers.”

³² Marble, *Pestilence* 201.

the poor house, at least in times of epidemics. In the Record Book of the Commissioners of the Halifax Poor Asylum for August 7, 1834, it was noted by the Commissioners that four men died during the night of cholera and five more were “lying dangerously ill by the same distemper”. As a result, it was resolved that twenty coffins be constructed to accommodate the dead and in anticipation of those that would follow.³³ As previously noted, during the 1827 smallpox outbreak, 247 coffins were constructed by the poor house inmates in order to bury the 247 inmates who died from the disease (116 men, 67 women, and 64 children).³⁴

Countless requisitions for coffin lumber (planed pine, pine, and spruce), gross coffin studs, coffin name plates, and handles have been found within the minute books of the Charities Committee, the Commissioners of Public Charities, expense statements for the Poor’s Asylum listed in the Annual Reports of the Several Departments of the Civic Government of Halifax, as well as entries in the Journals of the House of Assembly.³⁵ For example, in October, 1907, 1000 feet of coffin lumber, one dozen coffin names plates, six gross studs, and one dozen handles were requested; in November 1909, two dozen coffin handles, three gross coffin studs, and one dozen name plates were ordered; and in May 1911, two dozen coffin handles, one dozen coffin plates, and six gross coffin studs were requested.³⁶ On April 30, 1899, a fee of \$5.00 was owed to J. Spencer, Undertaker.³⁷

³³ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 101, “Record Book, 1829-1839, 7 August 1834.”

³⁴ NSARM MG100, vol 156, #30a.

³⁵ NSARM RG25 series C, vol. 4-4a, February and July 1879; NSARM Nova Scotia, Journal, 1842 app. 34, 254; Journal, 1839-40 app. 34, 716; Journal 1837 app 8, 64; Journal 1836 app 10, 916; Journal 1835 app 12, 742; Journal 1834 app 44, 593. Most often, the entries state lumber for coffin and repairs to the building; therefore, it is uncertain what type of wood was used more frequently for the coffins.

³⁶ HRM Archives 102-96.1, 317, 389, 443, “Charities Committee Minutes, 28 October 1907; 3 November 1909; 4 May 1911.”

Since coffins were manufactured both for the use of poor house and the town, whether or not coffin fixtures were included on a poor house inmate's coffin is uncertain.

On occasion, some inmates took the liberty of announcing how they wished to have their body disposed of, allowing them to preserve a level of respect in death. At Halifax's South Street poor house, under the direction of the Superintendent, the body of inmate Ralph Cameron, was removed and transferred to Hopewell, Pictou County. Mr. R. Stewart, Station Agent in Glengarry, had previously signed an agreement to incur the expense of the transport.³⁸ At the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, Mary A., an inmate, recorded her final wishes on an undated card:

If I die it is my wish that my body shall be delivered over to Mr. Stone of Yonge St. to be forwarded to Mr. H.A___, Miss A___ + Master A___[.] it must not be wash or dressed in here nothing done to it what ever but giving over just as death takes it [.] what ever found on it giving up to Master E.F.A___ all of Toronto [.] Please if it happens pay attention to my wish [.] They know. Mrs. H.A.A___[.]³⁹

Evidence in the historical records indicates that some poor house inmates, if not all, received a funeral upon their death. In his appointment as a chaplain in the poor house, Reverend J. Cochran instructed "that services [were] to be held on the Sabbath days and that pastoral visitations and funerals be attended to."⁴⁰ In the minutes of November 7th, 1870 in which the above notice was made, it was also recorded that the Commissioners "received letters from the Rev. M. Bullock, John Abbott, and Edward Gilpin in reference to parties dying in the Asylum and their burial, was considered, but no

³⁷ HRM Archives, Annual Reports of the Several Departments of the Civic Government of Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1898-99, 29.

³⁸ HRM Archives 102-96.1, 102, "Charities, 4 April 1900."

³⁹ Reaume 241.

⁴⁰ HRM Archives 102-95, 182, "Minutes, 1866-1878, 7 November 1870."

action taken thereon.”⁴¹ Considering this note, it is uncertain what the issue was and therefore, what direction was necessary.

Unfortunately, vivid details depicting an inmate’s funeral are scarce in the archival records. Instead, expense receipts recorded by the Commissioners provide such examples as “Paid J. W. Turnbull for coffin and burial 15.00”⁴² and “making coffin for Joseph Clark, burial grave close \$10.00.”⁴³ In 1861, expenses incurred by the Overseers of the Poor for a transient poor, named David Johnson, consisted of \$23.13 for 11 weeks and 4 days at the poor house until his death and \$5.00 to cover the cost of a funeral, coffin, digging the grave, and cloths.⁴⁴ Knowing a lavish funeral was generally not afforded to the poor, what these receipts do represent is evidence that paupers did receive the basic provisions in death; a typical example would be Mr. Johnson who was wrapped in cloth, fitted with a coffin, and had a funeral performed at his burial. Given that in England “until the seventeenth century, the poor were often buried without a coffin, with only the winding sheet between their flesh and the soil,”⁴⁵ it may be that a somewhat higher level of dignity in death was given to the pauper as centuries passed.

If life in the poor house was dismal, it was probably of small relief to the inmates when death came knocking, for their bodies, unless claimed by a family member or friend, had a very short distance to travel before finding their final resting place. At the Spring Garden Road poor house, an inmate was likely to walk out the front door of the poor house and be faced with the institution’s burial ground. What a gloomy feeling that

⁴¹ HRM Archives 102-95, 182, “Minutes, 1866-1878, 7 November 1870.”

⁴² NSARM RG25, Series C, vol 4-4a, “Minutes May 21, 1873.”

⁴³ NSARM Minutes RG25, Series C, vol 4-4a, “Minutes April 10, 1877.”

⁴⁴ NSARM Minutes RG25, Series C, vol 4-4a (no page).

⁴⁵ Richardson 20. A winding sheet was wrapped or wound around the corpse so that the face was still visible until burial.

must have been; knowing their dwelling companions gone before them lay resting mere feet away from where they once lived and that their own plot lay waiting to be filled. A similar layout as other English workhouses and poor houses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,⁴⁶ Halifax's first poor house lay adjacent to the poor house burying ground.

Documented in the 1749 allotment book, the "Burying place adjoining the Work House Lot" was recorded as:

Lying and being abutted and bounded as follows, to wit: southerly by the street leading by the Workhouse unto the Common, and there measuring 335 feet – on the west by the Workhouse lot, and there measuring 255 feet – northerly by land formerly laid out to Major Hoar and Jon'n Belcher, and there measuring 255 feet, containing two acres (Figure 10). This description being dated the 12th of March, 1783.⁴⁷

The burial ground property, which was transferred to the Church Wardens and Vestry of the Church of St. Paul in Halifax in 1793, measured one acre and twenty-seven rods and a half⁴⁸ and continued to be in use even after the 1833 statute, *An Act concerning Cemeteries or Burial Grounds for the Town of Halifax*, was passed, banning burials inside the town of Halifax.⁴⁹ The Act stated that "it has become necessary that the practice of interment within the Town or Suburbs of Halifax should be discontinued, and that a Common Public Cemetery or Cemeteries should be provided at a convenient distance therefrom, suitable for that solemn use, and in lieu of the places of interment now appropriated thereto."⁵⁰ As a result, Camp Hill Cemetery was established in 1844.

⁴⁶ Higginbotham, "The Workhouse."

⁴⁷ NSARM Allotment book, 196, *Poor House Burial Ground*.

⁴⁸ NSARM Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1845, App. 66, p. 194-195.

⁴⁹ Whidden 207-211.

⁵⁰ Whidden 207-211.

However, a petition submitted in 1845 requesting the continued use of the land as a burial ground denotes that the ban did not apply to the poor house burial ground.⁵¹



Figure 10. Plan of the Town of Halifax, c. 1760 (Reproduced with the permission of NSARM V6/240/1760). Richard Wenman's lot is shown west of the workhouse. According to Marble, it was recorded that individuals were kept in the stone home of Mr. Wenman until the number of inmates became too large; thus, the need to construct a proper workhouse (Smallpox 77).

⁵¹ NSARM RG5 series P, vol. 82, #56, 19 February 1845, Petition to the House of Representatives of Nova Scotia, from the Chairman of the Board of Commissioners.

An exact date as to when the poor house began burying their dead on the piece of land adjacent to the institution is unknown. However, in a report entitled “Report on Poor House Burial Ground,” submitted to the House of Assembly in 1845, a sub-committee of the Commissioners of the Poor stated that “from evidence they have examined, the place in question was used as burial ground as far back as 1780 or 1781 at which period it was used as such for the interment of Hessian soldiers, and also for paupers, and has continued to be used as a burial ground for paupers ever since.”⁵² If the workhouse was indeed established by 1760,⁵³ it is probable that the burial ground was in use shortly thereafter.

Despite being situated on the property of the Spring Garden Road poor house, the burial ground was not used solely for the inmates of the institution. In a memorial submitted by the Commissioners of the Halifax Poor Asylum for funds to erect a stone wall around the burial ground, they ask that the “Honorable members consider that this piece of ground has been used for upwards of fifty years as a burial place for the poor of the Town as well as for all strangers from every part of the Province or from any other part of the world.”⁵⁴ In addition, as stated above in the “Report on Poor House Burial Ground,” Hessian soldiers were also buried among the paupers.⁵⁵ In 1781, a Hessian regimental hospital was established “in the street leading to the new Great Barrack... probably South Barrack;”⁵⁶ thus, given that the hospital was located adjacent to

⁵² NSARM Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1845, App. 66, page 193.

⁵³ Marble, *Surgeons* 80.

⁵⁴ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 113, “Record Book, 1829-1839, 20 December 1834.”

⁵⁵ NSARM Nova Scotia, *Journal*, 1845, App. 66, page 193.

⁵⁶ Marble, *Surgeons* 127.

the poor house burial ground, it would seem logical that the poor house burial ground be used to bury dead Hessian soldiers.

According to the minutes of the Committee of the Cemetery for June 19th, 1849, the regulations of the City Council require that:

All interments in the Grounds be registered, and in as much as all deaths which occur in the Asylum for the Poor are entered on the Books of that Establishment and a correct list of such deaths can be obtained there from whenever required by the Registrar of the Cemetery and on which account the Commissioners of the Poor have been allowed the use of a Key so that they might obtain free access to the said Cemetery, for the interment of all who die in the Asylum, without being obliged to go through the customary and somewhat troublesome form of applying for permission to inter each pauper...⁵⁷

In one particular case, a deceased poor woman, having no relations, was provided with a coffin from the poor house and was buried in the poor house cemetery under the direction of J.W. Nutting, Esq., a Commissioner of the Poor. As she was not an inmate of the poor house and her death was not registered in the record book, the Committee of the Cemetery ordered that interments be restricted to poor house inmates only and for those who have been registered, “unless they are willing to proceed in the prescribed mode of application to the Committee of the Cemetery for free internments.” The Committee made it clear that if such infractions were to occur in the future, the key to the cemetery would be taken away from the Commissioners of the Poor.⁵⁸

When the poor house burying ground was transferred to St. Paul’s Church in 1793, the registration of burials in the poor house cemetery became the responsibility of the church. The earliest burial register recorded of a poor house inmate’s death was that

⁵⁷ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 216, “Record Book, 1840-1860, 19 June 1849.”

⁵⁸ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 216, “Record Book, 1840-1860, 19 June 1849.”

of Elizabeth Jodre, who died on November 1, 1817 at the age of 25.⁵⁹ However, it seems likely that during times of severe epidemics, when the death toll soared and the need to bury the dead rapidly were of greatest concern, record keeping was not of high priority. According to Partridge, St. Paul's record keeping was often substandard and on occasion were ordered to keep better accounts of burials, including the name and date in their burial registers.⁶⁰ During the 1827 smallpox epidemic, 247 inmates died; however, only 76 deaths were recorded in St. Paul's burial registers for that year.⁶¹

The manner and attention giving to digging an inmate's grave appears somewhat minimal, given that during a monthly meeting of the Commissioners of the Poor, it was brought to their attention that "the graves in the Burying Ground [were] not dug sufficiently deep." Upon discussion, "it was therefore resolved that directions be given to the keeper that no grave should be dug under 5 feet deep and that a notice be put up on the door of the Burying Ground to that effect."⁶² That same year, in a memorial presented to His Excellency on December 20th, 1834, the Commissioners remarked on the morbid appearance of the burial ground: "that the fence was continually requiring to be removed and the ground was exposed and very offensive to the public passing in and out of town."⁶³

Perhaps there was some legitimacy in the following comments based on secondary sources referring to the poor house burying ground:

⁵⁹ NSARM St. Paul's Death Register.

⁶⁰ Mitchell 24.

⁶¹ NSARM St. Paul's Death Register.

⁶² NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 97, "Record Book, 1829-1839, 7 May 1834."

⁶³ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 113, "Record Book, 1829-1839, 20 December 1834."

The Poor House Burial Ground, at the corner opposite the present new Court House, was at this time a standing nuisance in consequence of the want of drainage and the careless manner in which bodies of paupers were interred;⁶⁴ “there must have been many an edifying spectacle for the gentlefolk sniffing the flowers across the way. There poorhouse dead were buried hastily in shallow graves in the yard, and for many years there were complaints about the smell which hung over this part of Spring Garden Road;”⁶⁵ “there was a burial ground on the mainland connected with the prison and a writer in the Recorder of 1819 stated that in his younger days he frequently saw skulls unearthed from the falling away of the earth which formed the embankment of the cemetery.”⁶⁶

However, it appears that the Commissioners were conscious of the effects the cemetery had on the public, particularly in times of epidemics. In the same memorial, the request was made that a stone wall replace the current picket fence, as it would “effectually shut out the public view from the opening and closing of the graves which in a period of sickness is of the utmost importance...”⁶⁷

Though no direct account of mass graves was reported in the minutes of the Commissioners of the Poor, that the above paragraph notes the use of a stone wall to hinder the public’s view of the burials, may suggest that mass burials were not entirely an unfamiliar practice within the city of Halifax. As it was, mass graves appear to have been somewhat typical of poorhouses, particularly in Europe. Throughout Britain, pit burials of the poor were a common scene in most inner-city cemeteries; “a great square pit, with many rows of coffins piled one upon the other, all exposed to sight and smell.”⁶⁸ In Paris’ Cimetière des SS. Innocents, pauper graves were dug “thirty feet deep, twenty feet

⁶⁴ Atkins 201-202.

⁶⁵ Raddall 55.

⁶⁶ Grant, “Historical Sketches,” 17.8 (1938): 493.

⁶⁷ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 113, “Record Book, 1829-1839, 20 December 1834.”

⁶⁸ Richardson 60.

square, and contained up to 1,500 bodies. These graves stayed open, with their bodies or poorly constructed coffins exposed, until they were filled – approximately three years.”⁶⁹

As for the number of individuals buried here, the exact number remains conflicting. Gray wrote in “Recollections of Halifax,” printed in the *Acadian Recorder* on December 9, 1882, that “it was told me by a living witness that not less than eight hundred died and are interred in this ground.”⁷⁰ Recounted in *Physicians, pestilence, and the poor*, Marble estimates that the number of individuals buried in the poor house burial ground is closer to 4500 (2840 officially and 1700 unofficially reported deaths).⁷¹ A recount of the number of dead inmates buried in the Spring Garden Road poor house cemetery was not deemed relevant for this paper since it would offer little in the way of how bodies were handled.

What respect the poor house dead received as they were settled into their final repose under the cold ground is rather questionable. Long before the Spring Garden Road poor house had a chance to close its doors in 1869, propositions were made to use the adjacent burial ground for reasons other than its original purpose: in 1832, an application was submitted to have the burial ground used as a pasture for cattle;⁷² in 1850, the Attorney General submitted a request that a Court House be built upon the cemetery;⁷³ in 1858, a proposal to erect an Engine House upon the cemetery was submitted to the Commissioners of the Poor from the Fire Wards and City Council;⁷⁴ in 1877, the Committee of Commissioners of Schools applied to erect a High School upon the burial

⁶⁹ Iserson 620.

⁷⁰ *Recollections of Halifax*, *Acadian Recorder*, Dec 9, 1882, pg.2, col.4.

⁷¹ Marble, *Physicians* 217.

⁷² NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 74, “Record Book, 1829-1839, 7 July 1832.”

⁷³ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 252, “Record Book, 1840-1860, 10 July 1850.”

⁷⁴ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 408, “Record Book, 1840-1860, 7 August 1858.”

ground;⁷⁵ and in that same year, the Royal Engineers requested the use of the land for a cricket ground.⁷⁶

Over the years as these propositions were being submitted, discussion of “removing a portion of the wall surrounding the Old Poor’s House burying ground and of erecting a near iron railing on the remaining portion thereof, with a view to opening said grounds to the public as a promenade” was also on the agenda of the Commissioners of the Poor.⁷⁷ According to an advertisement in the *Acadian Recorder* for June 20, 1872, the following was announced:

At a meeting of the Board of Commissioners a day or two since, it was proposed to lower the wall around the old Poor House Cemetery to about two feet from the ground, and so surmount it with a handsome railing. Also to make a number of gravelled walks through the grounds and then throw them open to the public. As a number of trees were planted there some years since, and they have attained a considerable size and throw a good shade, this will be a very pleasant spot for a walk or an afternoon lounge. It is also proposed to place a number of seats or benches about the place in convenient positions. The total cost of these improvements, it is estimated, will be about \$2000.⁷⁸

Though motions were passed “to put the Poor House burying plot into respectable condition” in which the superintendent of the poor house was instructed to provide the superintendent of the cemetery with the necessary supplies,⁷⁹ it would be almost a decade before the old burial ground was converted into a public park. Under the heading “A New Public Square,” it was recorded in the *Acadian Recorder* on October 4, 1883, that “the public will be glad to learn that the matter has been dealt with lately, and that the Local

⁷⁵ HRM Archives 102-95, 293, “Minutes, 1866-1878, 8 January 1877.”

⁷⁶ HRM Archives 102-95, 300, “Minutes, 1866-1878, 7 May 1877.”

⁷⁷ HRM Archives 102-95, 201, “Minutes, 1866-1878, 7 November 1871.”

⁷⁸ “An Improvement” *Acadian Recorder* [Halifax] 20 June 1872, pg. 3, col. 1.

⁷⁹ HRM Archives 102-95, 221, “Minutes, 1866-1878, 7 October 1872.”

Government ha[s] granted the property to the City of Halifax upon condition that it shall be maintained forever as [an] open public square.”⁸⁰ Thus, Haligonians appeared to be relatively comfortable lounging on the well manicured paths of the new public square, while the corpses of the city’s poor lie rotting under their feet.

As decades passed, the history of the poor house burial ground appears to have faded deep within the historical record for no word of its existence was mentioned when the Halifax Memorial Library was constructed on the grounds of the old poor house in 1951. Should the cemetery have been located east of the poor house as Figure 1 indicates, according to the 1934 plan of Grafton Park,⁸¹ the library was constructed on top of the cemetery (Figure 11 and 12). Referring to the poor house burying ground, Collins noted that, “because of the location, as various excavations have been carried out over the years, the skulls and bones of some earlier citizens’ have, on occasion, been disinterred.”⁸² No details of these previous excavations were included. However, after a phase I archaeological resource impact assessment was conducted on the existing property of the Spring Garden Road Memorial Library, Davis Archaeological Consultants Limited noted that “no human remains were reported during the construction of the building.”⁸³

⁸⁰ “A New Public Square” *Acadian Recorder* [Halifax] 4 October 1883, p. 3, col. 3.

⁸¹ HRM Archives Map Collection BB-2-7672, Plan of Grafton Park 1934.

⁸² Louis W. Collins, *In Halifax Town: on going for a walk in Halifax, Nova Scotia* (Halifax: L.W. Collins, 1975) 81.

⁸³ Davis Archaeological Consultants Ltd., “Pre-Development Assessment of Spring Garden Road/Queen Street Public Lands Plan: Archaeological Resource Impact Assessment,” (Heritage Research Permit A2009NS12: 2009) 30. (The study area included the existing Spring Garden Road Memorial Library bounded by Brunswick Street, Spring Garden Road and Grafton Street (3)).

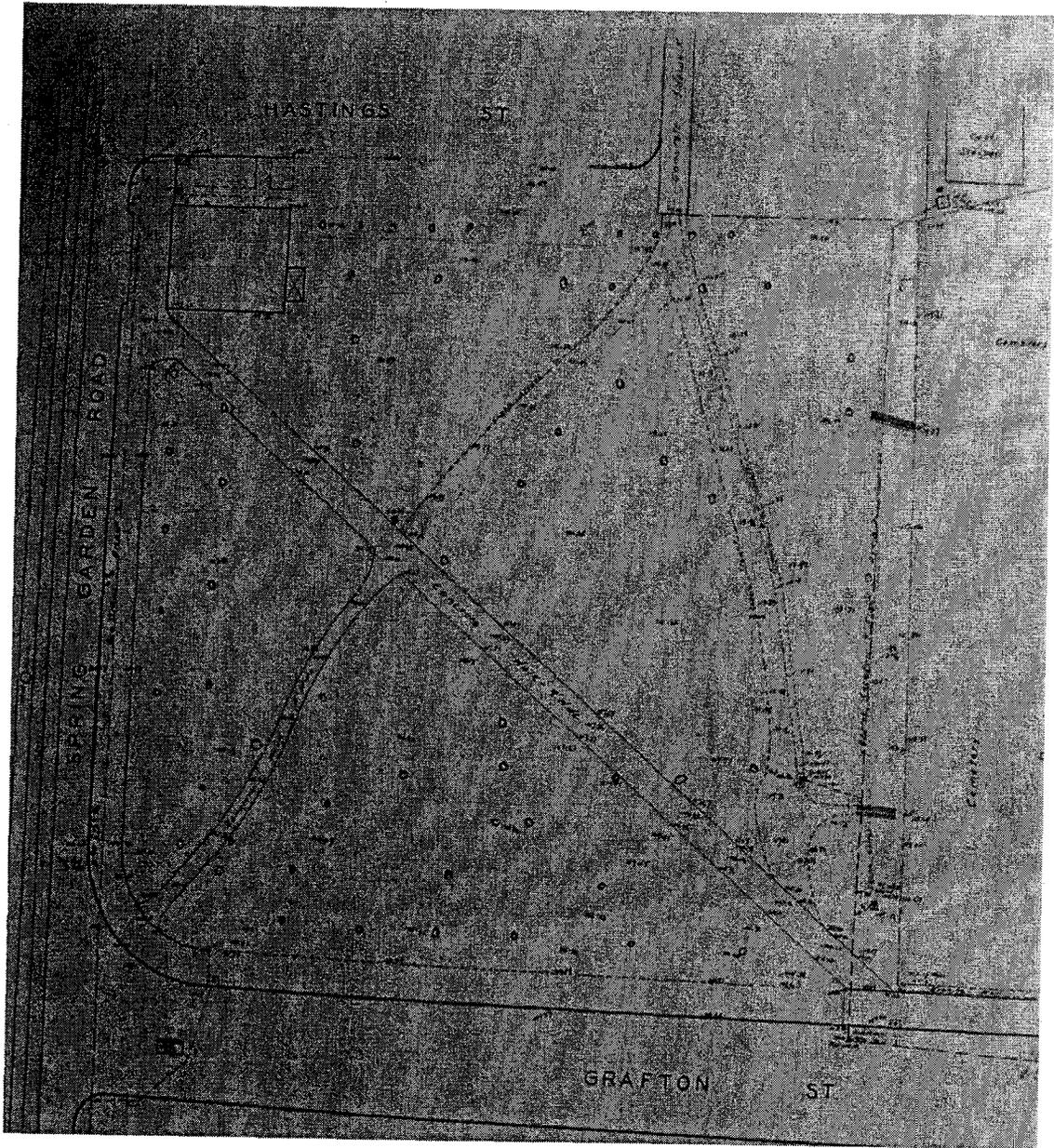


Figure 11. A 1934 plan of Grafton Park. Based on this map and the 1762 map (Figure 1), the poor house burial ground should be located under the concrete walk-ways on the east portion of this lot (Davis 30; Reproduced with the permission of HRM Archives).

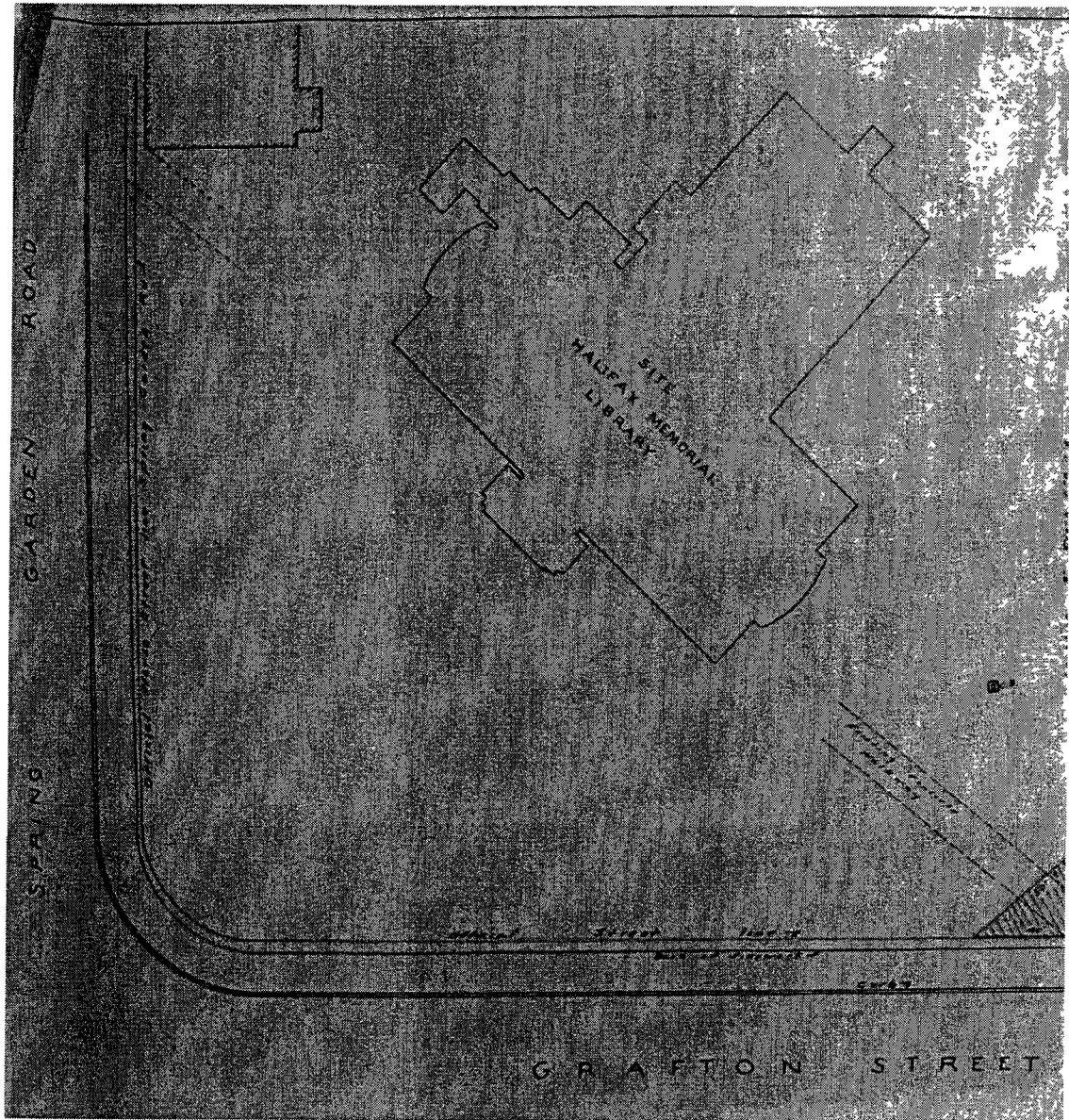


Figure 12. A 1949 plan of the Halifax Memorial Library. If Marble's numbers are correct and there is close to 4500 individuals buried in the poor house cemetery, it would be reasonable to assume that some are interred under the library, as well as under the walkways. Why no bodies were unearthed during the library's construction is somewhat puzzling (Davis 31; Reproduced with the permission of HRM Archives).

When the poor house burial ground stopped receiving the dead is uncertain. One would assume as inmates were moved to the new poor house on South Street in 1869, the old burying ground would have fallen into disuse. However, in 1873, four years after the

first South Street poor house opened, the Cemetery Committee informed the Board of Commissioners that the old burial ground was filled to capacity and the need for a new piece of land was imperative.⁸⁴ At the following month's meeting it was reported that the Cemetery Committee "would grant a piece of land near the southern boundary; but as the land is low there it would require considerable filling up."⁸⁵

There have been no records found indicating that a burial ground was associated with either of the two South Street poor houses. Consulting the burial registers for J. A. Snow's Funeral Home, the first application for burial of a poor house inmate was in 1890, seven years after the funeral home was established. Application for burial may have been earlier; however, from 1883 to 1890, the registers do not include any information linking the decedent to the poor house. Given the additional piece of land granted by the Cemetery Committee in 1873, it may be probable that inmates continued to be buried at the Spring Garden Road poor house burying ground until the first burial of an inmate at Camp Hill Cemetery in 1890.

In 1895, an amendment to the Nova Scotia Statutes of 1893, chapter 56, listed an agreement between the city of Halifax and the Fairview Cemetery Company stating that for \$6000, the Company would allow burial of all poor persons chargeable to the city in their cemetery for fifty years, as well as an agreement between the city and the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation for \$4000 for burial in the Mount-Olivet Cemetery.⁸⁶

Reviewing the burial registers for J. A. Snow's Funeral Home (est. 1883) and Cruikshank's Halifax Funeral Home (est. 1902), beginning in the late nineteenth century,

⁸⁴ HRM Archives 102-95, 227, "Minutes, 1866-1878, 7 November 1873."

⁸⁵ HRM Archives 102-95, 228, "Minutes, 1866-1878, 7 December 1873."

⁸⁶ NSARM, J/04 H6, Statutes of Nova Scotia 1895, cap 49.

the poor house dead were interred in city cemeteries, notably Camp Hill (est. 1844), Holy Cross (est. 1843), St. John's (est. 1839), Fairview (est. 1893), and Mount Olivet (est. 1896); the earliest being John McLean, who died and was buried in the Camp Hill Cemetery in 1890.⁸⁷ On occasion, a deceased inmate is listed as being buried outside the city; for instance, Martin Joseph who died on September 9, 1907 of tuberculosis of the bowel, was buried in Ketch Harbour; Mary Bouchie, who died on April 1, 1911 of consumption, was transported and buried in River Bourgeois,⁸⁸ and Duncan Livingston who died on March 20, 1908 was buried in New Glasgow.⁸⁹

Unfortunately, the burial registers of Halifax's two oldest funeral homes have only made a portion of their records public. J. A. Snow's Funeral Home's burial registers are accessible until 1942, while records from Cruikshank's Halifax Funeral Home are available to 1966. Elizabeth Franklyn, dying on January 30, 1966 is the last entry of a poor house inmate in Cruikshank's registers.⁹⁰ Buried at the Gates of Heaven Cemetery in Lower Sackville, NS, no grave marker adorns her grave. The last public burial register of Snow's shows that Maria (Cox) MacDonald, deceased September 11, 1942, was buried in the St. John's Cemetery and after speaking with the cemetery and grounds manager, it was confirmed that no marker was associated with the grave.⁹¹ At this time, the records remain in the hands of the abovementioned funeral homes and are not publicly accessible.

Neither the archival records, nor DACL's report of the Spring Garden Road Memorial Library revealed any grave markers associating the land's former use as a

⁸⁷ NSARM Snow's Funeral Home Burial Registers (Registers #1-4 Book #4).

⁸⁸ NSARM Snow's Burial Registers (Register #7, Book #2).

⁸⁹ NSARM Cruikshank's Burial Registers 1905-1929.

⁹⁰ NSARM Cruikshank's Burial Registers.

⁹¹ Personal communication, Steve Hardman, 13 April 2011.

burying ground. Not surprisingly, grave markers seldom accompanied a pauper's grave. Until the early twentieth century, cemetery bylaws in Lancaster "prohibited the installation of a headstone on the pauper grave, frustrating the use of the gravespace as a concrete memorial to the dead."⁹² As in life, the story of an inmate's death left very little trace. In many cases, as their poor weary bones turn to dust, the tale of their life is seldom retold. In St. John's Cemetery, an overgrown tree sits upon the unmarked grave of Elizabeth G. Wilton, who died May 25, 1910 of senile debility. Though a tree sits upon her grave, it is uncertain whether the tree was planted by a family or friend, or by Mother Nature's hand. It was not planted by the cemetery's staff (Figure 13).⁹³

⁹² Strange, "Only a Pauper" 160.

⁹³ Personal communication, Steve Hardman, 22 March 2011.

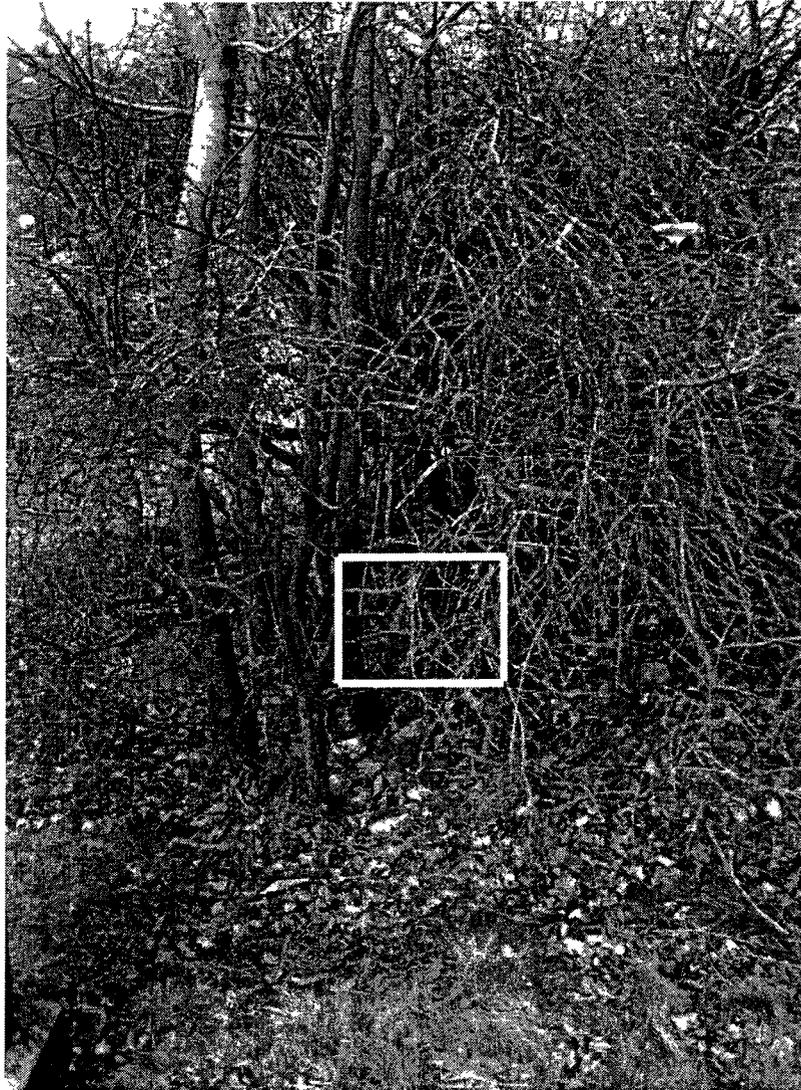


Figure 13. Unmarked grave of Elizabeth G. Wilton, St. John's Cemetery (Cynthia Simpson 2011).

7 ~ *Analysis*

In the Victorian period, treatment of the dead generally began with laying out the body; the dead was washed, shaved if necessary, dressed in either a shroud or winding sheet, and finally placed in a coffin. The body was then placed in a designated room in the house for up to three days where family and friends were invited to view the body, an activity which encouraged condolences to be paid to the mourners and last respects given to the dead. Once complete, the mourners transported the body to its final resting spot, most commonly to a local burying ground such as the local churchyard or a graveyard situated at the town's border, where a religious representative would say a prayer for the dead. As the body lay in its grave, "the last act of throwing into the grave a branch, straw, or commonly dirt from the earth before leaving the place of interment was a frequent gesture recognizing the finality of the journey."⁹⁴

Based on archival evidence, an analysis of how the dead of Halifax's poor houses were handled portrays a somewhat similar image to that of the typical Victorian period burial custom; an image not exclusive to the poor houses of Halifax, but one that is comparable to similar institutions in North America and England. Though no record was found describing a Halifax poor house inmate's body being laid out, washed, viewed, and waked, nor has there been any indication that mourners hovered over the grave, waiting to send the dead off in custom, throwing soil on the coffin as a gesture of farewell, many other components of Victorian mortuary practices are consistent.

Upon their death, some inmates, if not all, received an inquest, were fitted with a coffin and cloth, and were transported to their grave where a funeral was, most likely,

⁹⁴ Laderman, *The Sacred Remains* 27-37.

held, given Reverend Cochran's instructions that "pastoral visitations and funerals be attended to."⁹⁵ In addition, it is highly probable that the specific religious denomination of the dead was respected given that the Commissioners of the Poor had employed the clerical services of the Evangelical Alliance, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Church of England to tend to the religious beliefs of the inmates during their life at the poor house.⁹⁶ In respect to inquests, although the underlying reason for such a practice may have been more heavily influenced by the want of medical advancement, nonetheless, as a result their cause of death has become part of the archival record.

Evidence from the historical record supports the fact that the poor house dead were indeed buried in coffins, the construction of which was made from planed pine, pine, and/or spruce purchased specifically for coffin making.⁹⁷ Whether an inmate's coffin was affixed with a nameplate is uncertain; records show that these items were purchased by the poor house, but whether or not they were used on an inmate's coffin is unknown. Given that burial practices have the potential of revealing much about the socio-economic positions of the deceased and those responsible for his or her interment, and as funds were commonly scarce based on the frequent petitions by the Overseers of the Poor, it would seem likely that inmates were buried in the cheapest coffin material available.

As for the deceased inmate's final resting place, it appears that having one's remains disposed of in a prearranged agreement was a likely option for inmates; a true

⁹⁵ HRM Archives 102-95, 182, "Minutes, 1866-1878, 7 November 1870."

⁹⁶ HRM Archives 102-96.1, 64, "Charities, 6 July 1898."

⁹⁷ NSARM RG25 series C, vol. 4-4a, February and July 1879; NSARM Nova Scotia, Journal, 1842 app. 34, 254; Journal, 1839-40 app. 34, 716; Journal 1837 app 8, 64; Journal 1836 app 10, 916; Journal 1835 app 12, 742; Journal 1834 app 44, 593.

sign of respect for the dead by the poor house management. For the unclaimed, some of the dead were directed to the Halifax Medical Society for dissection, while others, in terms of the Spring Garden Road poor house, were buried in the graveyard adjacent to the facility. Shortly after the first South Street poor house was built in 1882, it appears that dead inmates were sent to local funeral homes upon their death, as no cemetery was connected with the South Street poor house property. And sadly, most, if not all, were buried in anonymous graves.

Examining the landscape of the dead can provide an important understanding of the relationship between the living and the dead, particularly since “placing the dead is one of the most visible activities through which human societies map out and express their relationships to ancestors, land and the living.”⁹⁸ Viewed as “mirrors of society,” cemeteries illustrate distinguishing characteristics of social structure, cultural customs, mortuary behavior, and architectural trends of a particular society.⁹⁹ Thus, what can be said about the Spring Garden Road poor house burial ground? The property offers no indication of its former use; no grave depressions are visible, no headstones or footstones mark the existence of dead paupers buried on the library’s lawn. Instead, a visit to the property on a warm summer day will offer scenes of Haligonians lying under the trees reading their books, sitting on benches or the steps of the library conversing with friends, eating their lunch on the neatly-trimmed lawn, leaning against the old Winston Churchill statue, and perhaps one or two individuals peddling for what little change people are

⁹⁸ Pearson 141.

⁹⁹ Liebens, J. 2003 “Map and Database Construction for an Historic Cemetery: Methods and Applications.” *Historical Archaeology* 37(4): 56-68.

willing to spare. The scene is full of irony and one must wonder if these individuals are fully aware of who lies beneath them and of their story.

Unfortunately, Halifax's public cemeteries offer little more in terms of identifying the poor house inmates who lie within. Of the three individuals whose locations were discovered, there is no history that grave stones have ever marked their grave. The circumstances for the lack of grave markers may originate from a multitude of reasons; perhaps the decedent had no kin to purchase a marker, perhaps the kin were unable to afford one, or perhaps the grave was marked with a metal or wooden cross though over the years, neglect, vandalism, or Mother Nature saw to it that it be removed. These questions remain unanswered. Unfortunately, it would appear that poor house inmates left as much trace in the historical records in life, as they did in death.

8 ~ A Case Study of the Cole Harbour Poor's Farm

Though today the Cole Harbour Heritage Park offers a peaceful place to walk and picnic, the site's usage was considerably different 125 years ago. In 1887, the Cole Harbour Poor's Farm was a working farm, built to house the "city's poor, destitute and those who were commonly referred to as the 'harmless insane'"¹ As a working farm with livestock, hay fields and vegetable gardens, the residents of the Poor's Farm were expected to produce what they could in order to support themselves.² Categorized as either harmless insane or pauper/poor, the number of residents varied throughout the years that the Poor's Farm was in operation with two residents in 1887 to 140 residents in 1929, with a mixture of men, women, young and old. However, the history of the Poor's Farm, later renamed the Halifax County Home in 1910, was short-lived, as a fire blazed through the property in 1929; inmates were relocated to the city's poor house on South Street until a rehabilitation center was built ten years later.³

Shortly after being established, the need for a cemetery on the Poor's Farm property became imperative. Five deaths occurred the following year,⁴ and as it was with the poor house of downtown Halifax, upon their death, many inmates were not claimed by their kin. Those unclaimed were buried by the County in the Poor's Farm cemetery, "located near the water's edge of the Cole Harbour Heritage Park" (Figure 15).⁵ Large

¹ Lori McKay, "Voices From the Past: A look at Cole Harbour's Poor's Farm," *Cole Harbour Weekly News*, 20April 2007: 8. According to Terry Eyland, cited in the newspaper issue, the term 'insane' was used in a different context back in the late 1800s than it does today; then, 'insane' could refer to "someone that had MS, or Tourette syndrome, or a condition that, 120 years ago, nobody knew about."

² McKay 9.

³ Heather MacLeod-Leslie, "Poor's Farm Cemetery and Dormitories: Bisset Road, Cole Harbour," (Permit no. A2007NS38: 2008) 2-3.

⁴ MacLeod-Leslie 2.

⁵ MacLeod-Leslie 2.

rocks used as headstones and in some cases, smaller rocks served as footstones, were placed upon a number of graves, as a sign of respect for the dead, though lacking any sort of inscription as to who lay beneath. Amongst the graves, a deep hole in the ground marks the existence of the dead house, where the dead were kept while waiting for the winter ground to thaw.

In the 1980s, when the Department of Natural Resources transformed the property into a park, one of their objectives was to identify the cemetery to park users as a place to be respected. No fence or interpretive signs indicated the property's prior use as a cemetery. Scattered among the unmarked headstones, white wooden crosses were placed to indicate the site's previous use; however, these crosses are not a true representation of the number of individuals buried here (Figure 14).⁶ The exact number of individuals buried at the Poor's Farm is uncertain. According to MacLeod-Leslie, "several individuals were noted as having been "buried by the county", but these documentary instances are far outnumbered by the number of visible depressions in the graveyard and the anomalies noted in the GPR data;" along with a verbal account that over 300 inmates died during the life span of the Poor's Farm.⁷

⁶ McKay 9.

⁷ MacLeod-Leslie 3.



Figure 14. Throughout the Cole Harbour Poor's Farm cemetery, white wooden crosses are found scattered over the area, marking it as a sacred place; however, not identifying any grave in particular. (Simpson 2011).

In 2007, volunteers from the Cole Harbour Trails Association and the Cole Harbour Heritage Farm contacted Saint Mary's University requesting that an archaeological examination to be conducted on the property to provide further information on the historical background of the Poor's Farm. As a result, a four week archaeological fieldwork investigation was conducted by Professor Heather MacLeod-Leslie and a group of Saint Mary's University students, including myself. Two separate projects were launched: the first in the field where the dormitories were believed to have

been before the fire of 1929 and the second in the cemetery. The latter is of relevance to this paper.

The objective of the archaeological work conducted in the cemetery was to “investigate [the] potential correlation of actual subsurface disturbance and cultural features along ground penetrating radar (GPR) test transects, with anomalies evident in the GPR data collected the previous year.”⁸ Thus, if a correlation existed between the GPR data and an identified grave, it was unnecessary that any other grave be disturbed. In this small-scale obtrusive practice, the limits of the cemetery could be established; a delimiting fence could be constructed around the cemetery and individual grave markers placed in their appropriate locations.

In the cemetery, five test pits were opened, two north of the dead house and three to the south (Figure 15). A total of four graves were identified during the project. Combining a significant grave-like depression partially evident in test pit 1 (TP1) and the corresponding GPR data, TP1 became a fully-excavated grave, although burial materials were found in test pits 1, 3 and 4. As the correlation between subsurface anomalies and the GPR data proved accurate, it was unnecessary to disturb additional graves; the research objective had been achieved through TP1.

⁸ MacLeod-Leslie 1.

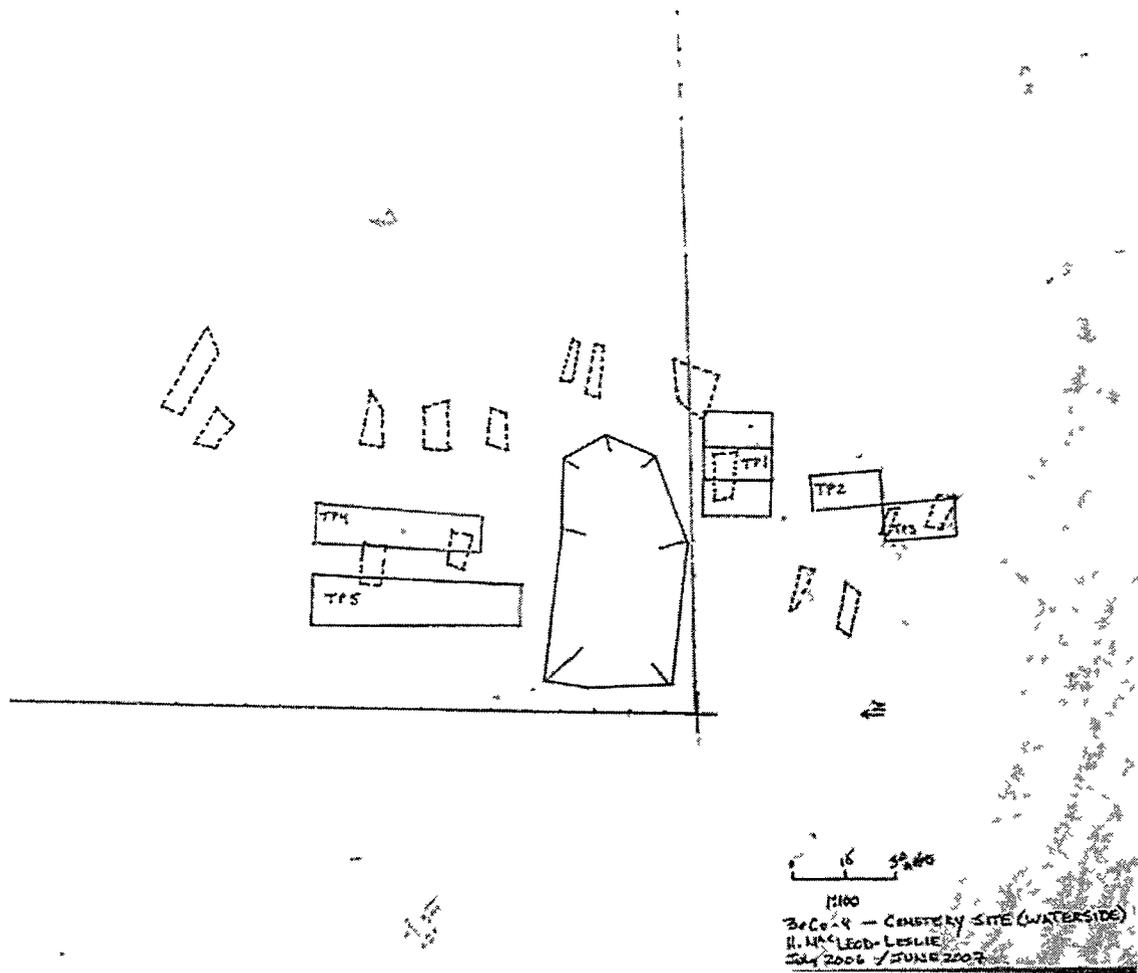


Figure 15. Site plan of the cemetery. The dead house is the large outline in the center with two test pits to the north and three to the south (Reproduce with the permission of MacLeod-Leslie, 5).

The full excavation of TP1 revealed the human remains of an individual, estimated to be a young girl, possibly between the age of 12 and 15.⁹ MacLeod-Leslie's interpretation of the child's disposition suggest that "her coffin was possibly dropped as it was lowered into the shaft, the left hand was near her face, adjacent the north wall of the grave shaft and her right hand was, roughly, over her left shoulder. Her legs [were] in a

⁹ MacLeod-Leslie 21

flexed position, leaving the eastern third of the grave empty of skeletal material.”¹⁰ Her remains were transported to Saint Mary’s University where biological anthropologist, Dr. Paul Erickson studied her remains. In his report on the skeletonized human remains excavated from the Poor’s Farm cemetery, Erickson noted that no cause of death was evident based on the fragmentary state of the remains.¹¹ On August 10, 2007, the individual was reinterred in her grave, coffin wood and hardware included. The original head and foot stones were replaced upon her grave at approximately the original position and depth.¹²

Though only one grave shaft was fully excavated, interesting details emerged from the material culture and the character of the grave shafts of test pits 1, 3 and 4. In test pit 1, burial material was encountered at 78cm below the modern surface; though complete excavation of the shaft was reached at 127cm. A deeper grave would have been impossible given the solid bedrock at the bottom of the grave shaft. A void located under a large rock in test pit 4 revealed coffin lining at a depth of only 44cm below the modern surface. Hardly the typical ‘six feet under’ one would hope for in a grave. Whether the rocky terrain was the sole reason for shallow graves is unknown. It seems rational to presume that shallow burials were a typical feature of poor houses and poor farms. Why would the caretaker spend unnecessary time and energy digging a deep grave for an unclaimed pauper? Recall even the Commissioners of the Poor in Halifax had to post a

¹⁰ MacLeod-Leslie 27.

¹¹ MacLeod-Leslie 38.

¹² MacLeod-Leslie 14, 34.

notice on the door to the Burying Ground stating that no grave was to be dug less than five feet deep.¹³

Aside from the depth of the grave shafts, excavation of the cemetery test pits provided further details of the poor's farm's burial practices. Initially, it was not known whether inmates were buried in coffins, but material culture recovered from the four identified graves served as confirmation: coffin wood, hardware and cloth were found in TP1 and TP3 (p. 18), and black broad cloth coffin lining was found in TP4 (p. 9). No grave goods were found with the individual disinterred in TP1; whether grave goods accompanied the dead of adjacent graves is unknown. Given that the individuals buried here were unclaimed, it is highly probable that no grave goods were included with the dead.

As noted earlier, I was one of the Saint Mary's students who participated in this archaeological fieldwork and working in TP1 rewarded me with a deep and moving personal experience. Crouched inside the graveshaft, the smell of damp earth and the sound of hollowness as my trowel passed over the cranium still echoes in my mind, filling my senses. Respect for the dead is ingrained in me; I pause, close my eyes, and reflect while passing a cemetery; I am cautious not to step on the grave itself, except in times when I am drawn to run my fingers along the grave markers iconography.

Shortly after realizing I was the first to come into contact with this child after her burial, a sense of responsibility fell upon me. That this child lived her life in poverty, as an inmate of the poor's farm, and in death, her body went unclaimed, buried by the county, deserves attention. As stated by MacLeod-Leslie,

¹³ NSARM RG25, series C, vol 5, 97, "Record Book, 1829-1839, 7 May 1834."

the individual temporarily disinterred for this project was young, and emblematic of the tragedy that often resulted in people living their lives in poverty, illness and powerlessness...It is easy and, perhaps, more comfortable, to forget the realities of residents of such places, now and in the past.¹⁴

However, these 'places,' these poor house/poor farm institutions, are a part of our history; they were part of our towns and the people who relied on such institutions were our neighbors, their story deserving of our time and our respect.

¹⁴ MacLeod-Leslie 17.

9 ~ Conclusion

Death is universal, certain and, to some, final. Some may long for it, while others are saddened, frightened, or indifferent toward the eternal rest which awaits us all. Death can be expected or unexpected, planned or unplanned, but whatever the case may be, once deceased, we are left in the hands of those responsible for disposing of our remains. All we can do is hope that respect and dignity are bestowed upon us; likely the final wishes of many of Halifax's poor house inmates.

Before beginning my research, I had presumed a neglectful, uneventful fate for Halifax's deceased poorhouse inmates, that they were carelessly interred, possibly in mass graves, with no grave goods, no touching final words to the dead, no mourners, and no elaborate grave markers. This miserable ending to a hard-lived life, I attributed to those responsible for providing for the poorhouse inmates. However, as my research developed, it became obvious that once left in the hands of the Commissioners of the Poor, a poor house inmate was indeed cared for, in life and in death, by individuals who did the best they could given the resources and facilities at their disposal. Perhaps the treatment provided to the deceased inmates should be considered adequate when placed in context of Halifax's early beginnings and its lack of social services for marginalized groups, including poor persons.

In an age when Halifax's development is deemed significant to the economic security of the town, where high-rises and building complexes invade the city's natural beauty, the preservation of its history grows ever more in importance. In 2011, as development began on the Halifax Central Library, the closing of the Spring Garden Road Memorial Public Library was anticipated. What will become of Halifax's first poor house

location is uncertain; however, the probability of an historical archaeological assessment of the property has the potential of resurfacing an important part of Halifax's history.

Where the archival records of the poor house and its burial ground conclude, the tools of archaeology have the potential of uncovering details never before documented; offering an unequivocal glimpse into early poor house mortuary practices, such as mass graves, coffin wood and cloth, grave goods, as well as the position of the body at time of burial, should such material culture be present.

The history of the Halifax's poor houses is a significant part of the city's story, from its settlement well into the twentieth century, and those inmates who perished within their walls are evidence of what this city was in the beginning and how it has developed in the last 260 years. The inmates may have been relatively voiceless during their lives in the poor house, but their existence lives on in the archival record, as does their remains located within the soil of our beloved city.

Based on the literature examined, a recurring theme unfolded emphasizing similarities in practice throughout North American and European institutions of poor relief, from admission to the poor house, rules of conduct, punishment, and when revealed, treatment of the dead. Although an extensive archival search was conducted for this analysis, the potential for further research is promising when one considers the remaining 29 poor houses established throughout the province. It is likely, should documents exist on the treatment of the poor house dead in other counties in Nova Scotia, that comparisons could be made with the mortuary practices documented in Halifax. Yet, if such comparisons are not justifiable, there is still an advantage to be had and that is, that another institution of poor relief and its inmates has been researched and written

about, becoming accessible knowledge to the public, enhancing the potential for discussions, and ultimately and most importantly, bringing a part of our history back to the surface.

Appendix A: A list of voluntary organizations, founded shortly after Halifax was settled, that endeavored to compensate for the lack of poor relief offered by the poor laws in effect during this time period.¹

Name of Organization **Date of Organization**

St. Paul's Church 1759

North British Society 1768

Charitable Irish Society 1786

Saint George's Society 1786

Poor Man's Friend Society 1820

Sisters of Charity (Home of the Guardian Angel, Saint Joseph's Orphanage) 1849

Halifax Visiting Dispensary 1855

Protestant Orphanage (Halifax) 1859 (57)

Victoria Hall (Home for Women) 1860

Halifax Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor 1866

Halifax Infants' Home 1875

Nova Scotia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty (S.P.C.) 1877

Local Council of Women 1894

Immigrant Children 1903

Catholic Charities of Eastern Nova Scotia 1903

Home for Aged Men 1905

Protestant Orphanage (Bible Hill) 1910

Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children 1917

Bairncroft Orphanage 1918

*Halifax Relief Commission 1918

I.O.D.E. Home for the Mentally Deficient 1918

Community Chest – United Way 1925

Welfare Council of Halifax 1930

¹ Scribes, 36-37.

Appendix B. Abstract of return of paupers prepared from returns sent to the house of assembly for the session of 1852.¹

Counties	No. of Paupers	Males	Females	Average ages	How disposed of	Amount of relief and mode of	Amount of relief and how estimated	Terms of engagement	Supervision exercised	Names of parties who have them in charge
Lunenburg	22	7	15	Ages not all given	By private contract	240£ paid in money	By private contract	One year	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Inverness	None	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Sydney	30	16	14	56	By private contract	111£ 5s 9d paid in money and clothing	By private contract	One year in some cases	By O'seers of the Poor	Not given
Cape Breton	40	20	20	52	By tender and private contract	Weekly and yearly allowance in money	By private contract	By the year	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Richmond	None	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Guysborough	41	27	14	50	By public auction	284£ 15s paid in money	284£ 15d by public auction	One year	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Colchester	14	7	7	42	By private contract	For year, half year, quarterly and weekly	By private contract	For year, ½ year, quarterly and weekly	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Queen's Co.	31	16	15	Ages not all given	By private contract	Per annum and per week, amount £442	By private contract	Per annum and week	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Yarmouth	43	17	26	67	8 by auction, rest by private contract	442£ per week and 7 months	442£ public auction and private contract	Per week and 7 months	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return

¹ NSARM Nova Scotia, Journal, 1852, no. 34 (Reel #3534).

Counties	No. of Paupers	Males	Females	Average ages	How disposed of	Amount of relief and mode of	Amount of relief and how estimated	Terms of engagement	Supervision exercised	Names of parties who have them in charge
Kings Co.	48	32	16	Ages not all given	By auction & private contract	446£ 14s 5d per annum and week	446£ 14s 5d by auction and private contract	Per annum and week	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Digby	38	15	23	41	By auction & private contract	206£ 10s per annum	206£ 10s per annum	Per annum	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Cumberland	37	Not given	Not given	Ages not given	By auction & private contract	219£ 12s 10d yearly and half yearly	Public auction and private contract	Per annum and half year	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Township of Annapolis	16	7	9	46	Not stated	105£ 16s 11d paid annually	105£ 16s 11d paid annually	Annually	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Township of Wilmot	15	10	5	63	Public proposals and conditional agreements	95£ 10s 6d paid annually	95£ 10s 6d paid annually	Annually	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Township of Clements	9	3	6	41	Private contract	62£ 19s 6d paid annually	62£ 19s 6d paid annually	Annually	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Dalhousie and Perot	3	2	1	46	Public auction	Amount not stated	Not stated	Annual and for different periods	By O'seers of the Poor	Given in return
Granville	25	15	10	39	Public auction	£192	£192 by auction	Annually	By O'seers of the Poor	James Delap
Hants	30	18	12	41	Private contract	Amount not stated	Private contract	Annually	No supervision	Given in return

Counties	No. of Paupers	Males	Females	Average ages	How disposed of	Amount of relief and mode of	Amount of relief and how estimated	Terms of engagement	Supervision exercised	Names of parties who have them in charge
Shelburne	29	11	18	40	Private contract	Amount not stated	Private contract	Weekly, annually and temporary	By persons in charge	Given in return

Appendix C. A list of poor houses established throughout Nova Scotia.¹

County/Township	Poor House/ County Asylum	Date of Establishment
Annapolis County Bridgetown	Annapolis County Home Annapolis County Asylum	1881 1895
Antigonish County	Antigonish Poor Farm and Asylum	1860
Cape Breton County North Sydney Sydney Mines	Cape Breton County Asylum North Sydney Poor House Sydney Mines Poor House	1889 1895 1895
Colchester County Truro	Colchester County Asylum Truro Poor House	1908 1898
Cumberland County	Cumberland County Asylum	1894-95
Digby County Clare	Digby Poor House Saint Mary's Home	1891 1896
Halifax City	Poor House (later called the Halifax City Home)	1751-1958
Halifax County Cole Harbour	Poor Farm	1887 (became an asylum in 1940)

¹ Senior Scribes 23-24. For brief descriptions of all Nova Scotia's poor houses, see Senior Scribes (69-159).

Hants West Municipality	Poor House	1884
Hants East Municipality	Municipal Home	1895
Inverness County	Inverness County Asylum	1888-89
Kings County	Cornwallis Poor House Horton Poor House Aylesford Poor House Waterville Poor House County Asylum	1822 1858 1891 1922 1926-27
Lunenburg County Chester	Poor farm and Asylum Chester Poor House	1889 1911
Pictou County	Pictou County Poor House Pictou Town Poor House	1886 1895
Queens County	Poor House	1893
Richmond County	Poor House	1893
Shelburne Municipality Barrington	Poor House Barrington Poor House	1885-87 1887
Yarmouth County Argyle	Arcadia Poor House Chebogue Poor House Argyle Almshouse	1857 1870 1901

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