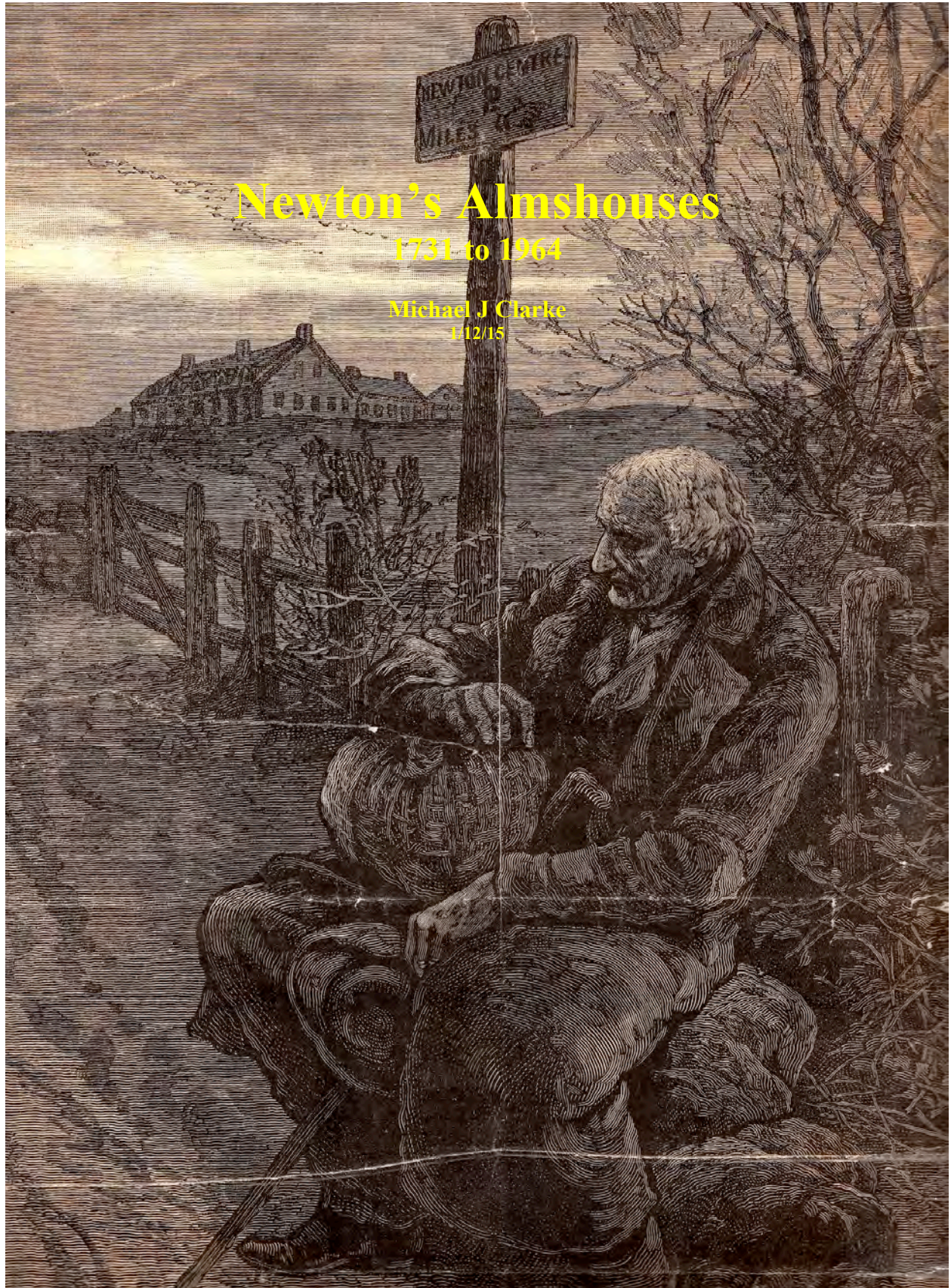


Newton's Almshouses

1731 to 1964


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1/12/15



Time Line

1731	Vote to establish Workhouse
1734	Board of Overseers of the Poor established
1763	Vote to build Workhouse
1818	Poorhouse established in Auburndale at former home of John Pigeon
1840	Almshouse & Poor Farm moves to Waban
1842	Dorothea Dix visits Waban Almshouse
1880	Poor Department established
1881	Newton Cottage Hospital founded as part of Poor Department
1886	Newton Cottage Hospital opens as a private institution
1890	Poor Farm land purchased on Winchester St. next to Working Boys Home
1898	Poor Department becomes Charity Department
1899	Almshouse built at 525 Winchester St.
1900	Almshouse inmates move to Winchester St.
1905	Board of Overseers of the Poor replaced by a single Overseer
1909	Almshouse becomes City Home
1917	City Home expanded
1929	Charity Department becomes Department of Public Welfare Overseer of the Poor becomes Director of Public Welfare
1938	Brick and stone toolhouse built behind City Home
1941	Board of Public Welfare commences meeting
1946	City Home becomes City Infirmary
1956	City Infirmary barn and piggery destroyed by fire. New barn built.
1964	City Infirmary closes
1968	Department of Public Welfare and Board of Public Welfare abolished Infirmary Land and buildings transferred to the Recreation Commission
1974	Community Gardens established on Infirmary Lands
1980	Purchase of land from Xaverian Brothers Working Boys Home
1987	Nahanton Park established by combining Poor Farm with WBH land

Cover: *The Misfortunes of Old Age – On the Way to the Poorhouse*, wood engraving by John N. Hyde, published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, September 9, 1882. The Waban Almshouse in Newton, MA is depicted on the hill.
Note the sign “Newton Centre – 2 miles ”.

Origins. Almshouses are intimately connected with our labor, social and economic histories.^{1,2} Inmates of early almshouses and workhouses included the ill, indigent, homeless, delinquent, disabled, alcoholic, insane and “feeble-minded”.³⁻⁵

In medieval times, the church established almshouses for the care of the poor. Following the black death of 1348-50 in England, the Statute of Cambridge in 1388 attempted to control the migration of scarce labor by placing restrictions on the movements of laborers and beggars.² Each local area (a hundred) became responsible for the relief of those who could not look after themselves. Servants wishing to move out of the district needed a letter from the “good man of the Hundred”, or risked being put in the stocks. Under the English Poor Law system, the poor were divided into the impotent poor, the young poor, the able-bodied poor, and the idle poor, who were considered undeserving of relief.⁶⁻⁸

Overseers of the Poor were established by the Act for the Relief of the Poor in 1597.⁷ A similarly named statute, also known as the Elizabethan Poor Law, was passed by Parliament in 1601 and created a national poor law system. The Poor Relief Act of 1662 determined that a person needed a “settlement” establishing the parish, to which the person belonged, that would be responsible for providing Poor Relief chargeable to the parish poor rates. By Cromwellian times, the term workhouse had replaced almshouse, reflecting Puritan attitudes. The Workhouse Test Act of 1723 said that those who wanted to receive relief had to enter a workhouse and undertake a set amount of work.⁶ The test was intended to prevent irresponsible claims on parishes. As relief was often only possible inside the workhouse, the real test was whether people would decide to enter the poorhouse or try to somehow continue on their own. In New England, the terms overseer of the poor, settlement, chargeable, able-bodied and idle poor would persist well into the 20th century.

New England. One way early Massachusetts communities would deal with the poor was to “warn them out.” If a town feared one of its residents was not be able to provide for themselves, it might either force them out - or leave them to fend for themselves.⁸ Towns would regularly exile women late in their pregnancy, so as to not have two mouths to feed.^{9,10}

Newton first voted to establish a workhouse in 1731. In 1733, the Selectmen authorized the use of one of the school houses for a work house, during the recess of the school, and that the Selectmen, or Overseers of the Poor, would have the power to set idle and disorderly persons to work. The first Overseers of the Poor were designated in 1734 and a committee was established to build a workhouse in 1750. However, it is not until 1763 that Newton put money behind its intentions and authorized £50 to build a workhouse, 24 ft x 26 ft, one story high. In 1765, a committee, which had been appointed to examine the laws relevant to regulating the workhouse, recommended that the Selectmen should temporarily run the workhouse until the next meeting, when the overseers of the house would be chosen.¹¹

The locations of these first workhouses were not specified, but detailed rules for the workhouse were drafted in 1768, including:

That if any person or persons shall neglect to repair to his or their work.....they shall be punished, either by denying him, her or them a meal, or whole day's allowance, or by gagging, or by whipping, not exceeding five stripes; or causing him, her or them to wear a collar round about his, her or their neck, with a wooden clog to it; or by an addition of labor to their daily task...

Let Out the Poor. In the early 1800s, Massachusetts towns experimented with an alternative to workhouses. In 1805, Newton authorized the Selectmen to “let out the poor in a way that shall appear to them for the interest of the town.”¹² This involved “vending” whereby the poor would be boarded out by means of auction (vendue) in which the winning bidder charged the least to board the poor.^{9,10,13} The winning bidder might also benefit from the labor of the boarder.

Dorothea Dix expressed the following view of this process in Newton:

As, till within a late period, the town had owned no farm for the poor, this man, with others, had been annually put up at auction. I hope there is nothing offensive in the idea of these annual sales of old men and women, — the sick, the infirm, and the helpless, the middle-aged, and children. Why should we not sell people as well as otherwise blot out human rights: it is only being consistent, surely not worse than chaining and caging naked lunatics upon public roads or burying them in closets and cellars!¹⁴

In Newton, vending largely ended in 1817, but with exceptions noted later. In the following year, the lower farm of Captain Joel Houghton, consisting of 43 acres and convenient buildings formerly known as the Henry Pigeon Farm at Auburndale was purchased for \$2,500. This poorhouse was at the corner of Melrose and Auburn Streets in Auburndale, probably where the Auburndale Library and Turtle Lane Playhouse are today (Figure 1).¹¹ Dr. Lyman Gilbert, a resident of West Newton in the 1800s,¹⁵ wrote that “The Pigeon, house had become the home of the Poor, before I saw it. The inmates ranged from 22 to 28 in number. Of these, three or four were insane. Several were victims of intemperance.”¹¹ It is notable that Newton established a poorhouse and largely ended vending prior to the Quincy Report of 1821, which surveyed the methods Massachusetts towns used to provide for their poor and concluded that an almshouse with attached poor farm was the best means of doing so.¹⁶



Figure 1. Location of the Auburndale Workhouse on the River to County Road. 1831 Town Map

Poorhouse Rules. The rules of the Poorhouse at Auburndale remained reminiscent of those of the earlier workhouse and included:

All persons in this house who are able are to be kept to labor; and if any person or persons who are able shall refuse to work, or shall be slothful in their work, or shall waste or destroy the materials they are working upon, they shall be punished therefor.¹¹

The punishment for a breach of any of these articles by any of the paupers shall be by reducing the usual allowance of food, or by solitary confinement, or both, under the direction of the Overseers of the Poor. But in cases of outrage, when the security of any person is in danger by violence offered to any in this house, then the Keeper shall secure the author or authors of such outrage until notice can be given to one or more of the Overseers.¹¹

As the railroad brought more people, and the Poorhouse at Auburndale was on the road to the river and in a place suitable for a station, the land grew more valuable and the residents became less amenable to the wards of the institution. Consequently, around 1840, 40 acres were bought on the Sherburne Road (now Beacon St., Figure 2) and new buildings erected so that the poor farm and almshouse could be moved to the backwaters of Waban on the site of what is now the brick shopping district and the Angier School.¹¹

An historian of Newton expressed the following view of the poorhouse in 1880:

Such were the early provisions made for the poor of Newton, dictated, undoubtedly by the spirit of kindness, but difficult to be administered, owing to the depravity of human nature and the growing disposition of unworthy, designing and idle persons to secure a living without earning it. The difficulty of managing wisely this department of the government has grown everywhere with the growth of the country. Too often the unworthy and foreigners have found ample provision for their wants and the modest and worthy native poor, entitled above all to the benefit of such provision, have suffered.¹¹

In contrast to the Puritan attitudes concerning poorhouses, in 1864, when Newton took over the sales of intoxicating beverages, the almshouse was the designated distribution center.^{4,17} The warden of the Almshouse from 1856 to 1874 was John J. Ware,¹⁸ who was also the superintendent of roads and the City's liquor agent.^{19,20} It was not unusual for the warden to also be the superintendent of highways, as almshouses were often a source of seasonal labor.^{19,20} In 1868, the office of the selectmen was also at the almshouse.²⁰

Time for Asylums. It was the Waban Almshouse that Dorothea Dix visited in the fall of 1842. With some difficulty, she persuaded the matron to let her see two of the insane inmates, about whom she related the following to the Massachusetts Legislature in 1843:^{14,21}

Opening into this room only was the second, which was occupied by a woman, not old, and furiously⁸ mad. It contained a wooden bunk filled with filthy straw, the room itself a counterpart to the lodging-place. Inexpressibly disgusting and loathsome was all; but the inmate herself was even more horribly repelling. She rushed out, as far as the chains would allow, almost in a state of nudity, exposed to a dozen persons, and vociferating at the top of her voice, pouring forth such a flood of indecent language as might corrupt even Newgate. I entreated the man, who was still there, to go out and close the door. He refused. That was his place!

Sick, horror-struck, and almost incapable of retreating, I gained the outer air, and hastened to see the other subject, to remove from a scene so outraging all decency and humanity.

In the apartment over that last described was a crazy man, I was told. I ascended the stairs in the woodshed, and, passing through a small room, stood at the entrance of the one occupied, — occupied with what?

The furniture was a wooden box or bunk containing straw, and something I was told was a man, — I could not tell, as likely it might have been a wild animal, — half-buried in the offensive mass that made his bed, his countenance concealed by long, tangled hair and unshorn beard. He lay sleeping. Filth, neglect, and misery reigned there. I begged he might not be roused. If sleep could visit a wretch so forlorn, how merciless to break the slumber!

Protruding from the foot of the box was — nay, it could not be the feet; yet from these stumps, these maimed members, were swinging chains, fastened to the side of the building.

I descended. The master of the house briefly stated the history of these two victims of wretchedness. The old man had been crazy about twenty years.

But, as I was saying, the crazy man was annually sold to some new master; and a few winters since, being kept in an out-house, the people within, being warmed and clothed, "did not reckon how cold it was"; and so his feet froze. Were chains now the more necessary? He cannot run. But he might crawl forth, and in his transports of frenzy "do some damage."

That young woman,— her lot is most appalling. Who shall dare describe it? Who shall have courage or hardihood to write her history? That young woman was the child of respectable, hard-working parents. The girl became insane. The father, a farmer, with small means from a narrow income had placed her at the State Hospital. There, said my informer, she remained as long as he could by any means pay her expenses. Then, then only, he resigned her to the care of the town, to those who are, in the eye of the law, the guardians of the poor and needy. She was placed with the other town paupers, and given in charge to a man. I assert boldly, as truly, that I have given but a faint representation of what she was, and what was her condition as I saw her last autumn. Written language is weak to declare it.¹⁴

In her effort to persuade the legislature to invest in insane asylums, Dix also added the following case to her diatribe:¹⁴

It may not appear much more credible than the fact above stated, that a few months since a young woman in a state of complete insanity was confined entirely naked in a pen or stall in a barn. There, unfurnished with clothes, without bed and without fire, she was left— but not alone. Profligate men and idle boys had access to the den, whenever curiosity or vulgarity prompted. She is now removed into the house with other paupers; and for this humanizing benefit she was indebted to the remonstrances, in the first instance, of an insane man.

Dix's campaign had fair success as far as Newton was concerned. In 1893, the report of the Overseers of Poor notes: "The recognized increase of Insanity, appears in our city equally with other communities. With such facilities as exist at our almshouse at present, it has not seemed desirable or profitable to remove from Insane Hospitals cases there provided for and chargeable to the City of Newton." The report then lists the steadily increasing bills for the support of the insane in hospitals over the previous ten years.²²

The Hydes - Rich and Poor. Newton has retained the Almshouse Registers for its inmates from 1819-1859 and 1865-1889.^{23,24} From 1880 to 1923, the US Census counted paupers in a periodic "Paupers in Almshouses" series. New England appears to have had the most paupers in

almshouses on a per capita basis, with Massachusetts averaging about 4th in the nation.³ New England also had the highest number of foreign-born in its almshouses.

One family that makes the transition between the poorhouse and the almshouse is that of John and Hannah Hyde. It is possible that this family descended from either of the two Hyde founding families of Newton.

Samuel Hyde (1610-1689) and his brother Jonathan Hyde (1626-1711) settled in what was then called Cambridge Village in 1640 and 1647 respectively. They acquired several hundred acres of land in the vicinity of the Meeting House and Burying Ground, which they held in common until 1661. Samuel settled north of the Old Burying Ground, Jonathan to the south near the corner of Homer Street. The “Hyde House” was on Centre St. but is now at 27 George Street.²⁵ The home of Jonathan’s son Eleazar (1664-1731) is at 401 Woodward Street,²⁶ part of which was known as the Sherburne Road. Both houses are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.^{25,26}

Hannah Hyde entered the Auburndale Poorhouse on March 28, 1834 with three children John, Jr., who was seven, Mary (5) and William (3), and was joined by her Husband John on September 11.^{24,27} Hannah and John lived continuously in the almshouse for the next forty years.²³

A year after their arrival, Hannah delivered a baby girl, Elizabeth, on March 10, 1836. Two more girls followed, Caroline (October 14, 1839) and Emerline (March 1, 1842) and then a boy, Charles, on December 1, 1843. Hannah bore three more girls: Adeline (November 7, 1847), Eunice (1849), Eleanor (March 6, 1850) and finally a boy Alfred in 1853, when she was 45.^{23,27-30}

On April 12, 1847, the pauper register records the following contract regarding the fifteen-year old William Hyde: “The Selectmen agree with Noah S. King for the service of William Hyde a pauper in the town of Newton. The condition of this circumstance is as follows: said King is to clothe and board said William Hyde and send him to all the winter terms of public school in the school district in which said N.S. King resides. This assignment is to expire at the time said Hyde shall become eighteen years of age. Should said Hyde have a protracted sickness some consideration is to be made by the town.”²⁴

On the same page, we find: “Caroline Hyde let out to Sylvams Wetherbee. Said Wetherbee to board and clothe said Caroline and send her to the public school in consideration of her service. Caroline is to stay with said Wetherbee until she is eighteen years of age unless she is married prior to that time.”²⁴

Similarly, “Elizabeth Hyde is with Samuel Riay. Said Raiy is to board Elizabeth and send Elizabeth to the public school in consideration of her service. Said Elizabeth is to remain with said Reay till she is eighteen years old unless she is married before that time.”²⁴

Years later, we learn that “Charles Hyde went to Elazer Tyler in Natick to live, April the 18th, 1853.” An entry on April 12, 1854 relates that “Adaline Hyde went to live with Wetherbee at Newton Corner.” In another on March 17, 1858, “Adaline Hyde 6 weeks at [illegible] age 10.”²³

There are several other instances when the children are recorded as “went away”, which may or may not have been periods of indenture.

When he was 18, Charles enrolled in the 58th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, Company G, a regiment that in 1864-65 engaged in almost every major conflict of Grant’s Army of the Potomac from the Wilderness Campaign to Appomattox. Charles died on Nantucket in 1920.²⁸

The youngest, Alfred, was in and out of the almshouse in 1868, 1872, 1880, and the last time from 1884-86. His daughter, Ida, was there in 1880, and his other daughters, Ethel and Hettie, were there in 1885, as was his wife Martha, in both 1880 and 1885.^{23,27} Alfred died in Natick in 1897.

The father, John, left the almshouse three days after his wife died on December 13, 1874, shortly after their possible relative, James Francis Clark Hyde, became the first mayor of the new City of Newton. John cycled in and out of the almshouse over a period of years and was permanently in the almshouse from 1878 until he died at 87 years of age on March 28, 1886.^{23,27} The Hydies had 36 known grandchildren.³¹

While it is unusual that an entire large family would be in the Almshouse for so long, an excerpt from the Selectmen’s Report of 1860 may shed some light on this.

Newton was among the first towns settled in Massachusetts history dating back to the year 1639, then under the name of “Newtown.” By an act of the General Court, it received its present name Dec. 8, 1691. Many of the descendants of the early settlers claim aid or support from the Town. Sometimes these claims run back three or four generations, they having, for some cause, failed to gain any other settlement, or their ancestors for them. The investigation of these cases renders the office of Overseer of the Poor one of considerable importance and great responsibility.³²



Notably one of the Selectmen, who were also the Overseers of the Poor, was J.F.C. Hyde, from 1858 to 1869.^{33,34} His brother, John Newton Hyde, a political cartoonist who also illustrated a large number of children’s books (including *Poor-House Sam*³⁵), was one of America’s best artists in black and white engraving.³⁶ His 1882 engraving captioned “The misfortunes of old age-on the way to the poorhouse” portraying an old man waiting outside the Waban Almshouse below a sign saying “Newton Centre 2 Miles” is shown on the cover.^{37,38} Could the old man be the other John Hyde who was the father of ten in the almshouse and in and out of the almshouse in the 1880s?

Two Newton Almshouses in 1900

Stadly maps in 1900 showing simultaneous Almshouses both in Newton Highlands and Waban.
(Courtesy of Peter Kastner, Community Heritage Maps)



Figure 2. 1900 Stadly map showing location of Waban Almshouse and Poor Farm.



Figure 3. 1900 Stadly Map showing (shaded) location of new Almshouse and Poor Farm at 525 Winchester St.

The Railroad Cometh (Again). The mayor's address in 1881 indicates that 32 acres of land and a house were bought in 1880 for \$3,200 in order to make the farm complete (Figure 2). The mayor justified the purchase by indicating that the income received from the expanded farm acreage amounted to a very high rate of interest upon the cost of the 32 acres. Moreover, the additional house “could be converted into a small-pox hospital, should our city be again visited by that scourge”.³⁹ Despite the expansion, the mayor felt that the almshouse was inadequate to meet the needs of the city, since it had more inmates than it could accommodate, necessitating placing too many people in a room, and “not affording that disposition of children which is required”.³⁹



The clerk of the Overseers of the Poor, Nathan Mosman, also noted that “the almshouse, which has been built about thirty-five years with little enlargement or improvement, is too limited in capacity for the present needs of the city.”⁴⁰ The next year, the Overseers and the City Council allocated \$4000 to enlarge the back of the almshouse with a two-story 100’x14’ addition. This provided

an additional 14’ to the dining room and kitchen, enlarged the pantry, storeroom, and the men’s sitting room, as well as hospital rooms and allowed for a larger proportion of single rooms. Overall the new arrangement consisted of 18 small and 8 large bedrooms, 4 square hospital rooms, one cell room, a men’s sitting room, bathroom, and the larger pantry, kitchen and dining room (Figure 9). The dining room was also used for religious meetings during the summer with several of the city’s pastors visiting to preach. In order to better heat the building, the old furnaces were removed and steam heat installed.⁴¹

The enlargement and other renovations of the Almshouse also appear to have impacted out-of-almshouse aid as the Overseers could now limit aid to those in the almshouse, as was done with the Workhouse Test Act:

The house and farm in their present condition and good management deserve a visit from citizens interested in this department of City work. The house now is such in capacity and equipment that the Board can, as occasion requires, refuse aid excepting at the Almshouse. It has been impracticable in the past, from lack of accommodations, to do this in many cases, where it seemed desirable. Although the comforts at the Almshouse are complete, a refusal to aid except there, proves in many cases an end of calls for aid.⁴¹

Almshouse Maps



Figure 4. Almshouse lands in 1874 Atlas before clearing.



Figure 5. Almshouse lands in 1895 Atlas after clearing.



Figure 6. Almshouse complex in 1907 Atlas (Labels added).

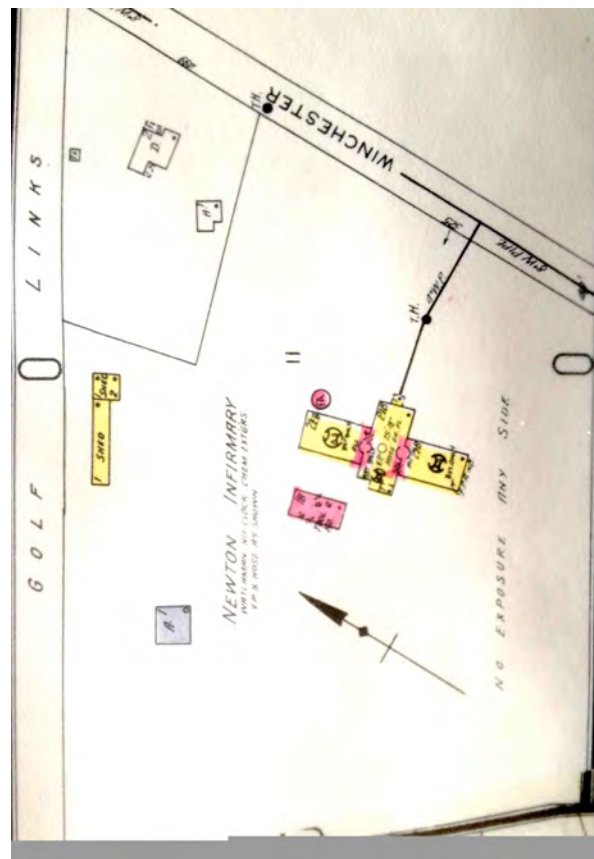


Figure 7. City Infirmary buildings in 1960 Sanborn Map showing new square barn and the 1938 rectangular toolhouse directly to the west of the enlarged almshouse.



Figure 9. The Waban Almshouse.

In 1883, the City Council voted to donate an 80 foot wide strip of land through the center of the Waban Poor Farm to the Boston and Albany Rail Road for the rapid-transit "Circuit Railroad" to connect several of Newton's villages.⁴² At the beginning of 1886, the mayor states that "The city farm contains about 58 acres and is located in such close proximity to the new railroad that it seems probable, that, in a few years, the land will be marketable at a price which will make it desirable to seek another location."⁴³ He also notes the founding of

the Newton Cottage Hospital, which was probably the motivation for establishing the Poor Department.

Almshouses and Poor Farms were often associated with Pest Houses, which were used to quarantine those with communicable diseases. One resident of Waban, Arthur B. Harlow recalled the Waban Pest House's curious demise, which just happened to coincide with the traditional Fourth of July bonfire (note Mr. Harlow's alibis):

On the Poor Farm, not far from the end of Kent Road, there was the city pest house. When the city decided that the land was too valuable to hold for a Poor Farm in Waban, it moved the almshouse to Oak Hill. On one fourth of July night, the pest house mysteriously caught fire, and because there was no hydrant nearer than Windsor Road and the fire department didn't have hose long enough, it burned to the ground. I was in bed at the time the fire started, but was one of the early arrivals, naturally. I think every boy in Waban, excepting me, was asked to appear at police headquarters and was questioned, but nobody ever knew who set the place on fire. I didn't. The other pest house was razed shortly afterwards, and the only remains of those two houses are the cellars, which were changed into sand traps, and which the members of the Brae Burn Country Club play through and never know how they came about.¹⁸

Probably the last use of the Waban Almshouse was for the inaugural event of what was to become the Mothers' Rest Association of Newton.¹⁸ The poor farm building and barn were torn down about 1902, and the foundations of the poor house lie buried beneath the Angier School playground surface.⁴⁴

Preparing to Move. In his 1889 address to the City Council, Mayor Heman M. Burr said that "The time has come for changing the location of the Poor Farm....The farm is only four minutes walk from Waban Station, occupying high land well adapted for building purposes and destined one day to support a comparatively large population. I think therefore that the question of its removal to some more remote situation should engage your immediate attention".⁴⁵

In 1890, the city bought two tracts of land, 19 acres from Thomas Ranney for \$7600 for and 5 acres from John Doyle for \$1000,⁴⁶ between Winchester St. and the Charles River for the Poor Farm (Figures 4-6) but the question of moving the almshouse remains for years. The report of the Overseers of the Poor in 1891 notes: "The Almshouse with ordinary repairs would be in all respects comfortable and equal to probable demands that may be made upon it for an indefinite

future. General repairs have been neglected for two or three years until the appearance of the buildings within and without is not creditable to the department or the city. This condition of affairs could be with moderate expense quickly remedied”.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the land on Winchester St. is cleared between 1890 and 1895 (cf. Figures 3-5). The foundation of one of the Ranney outbuildings is still evident (Figure 19).

Beginning with the establishment of the Worcester Insane Asylum in 1832, and continuing with Dorothea Dix’s efforts in the 1840s and 1850s the insane are gradually moved out of almshouses. When the Newton Cottage Hospital begins functioning in 1888, the ill are also moved out, but expenses for Newton residents in both the Hospital and the Almshouse remain in the Poor Department, which becomes the Charity Department in 1898. In 1848, the Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-Minded Youth is established in South Boston and in 1887 moves to Waltham, presumably decreasing another portion of the poorhouse population.

While there were private and religious orphanages, at the turn of the century, the Overseers of the Poor note that: “No provision has yet been made by the city for orphan children and those equally destitute, having parents, but no home worthy of the name. The only way open for them at present is adoption in new homes. The time may not be far away when wisdom and true economy will call for a house with presiding matron, where children suffering this destitution may be provided for and educated to something higher than permanent pauperism”.⁴⁷

Regarding the almshouse population, the Overseers relate: “Under the present policy, the number of inmates has been kept low. Once settled in the Almshouse, a person is likely to remain permanently, never again rising to the dignity of self-support. Bridge over a season of misfortune by temporary aid and the recipient is not heard from again for years, perhaps never.”⁴⁷

The Overseer. In 1893, Edwin M. Fowle,⁴⁸ became the Overseer from Ward 6. In 1895, he became a member of the Almshouse Committee and in 1898 he was both the Clerk and Agent for the Board of Overseers of the Poor. As indicated by the following sections of the 1898 By-Laws of the Overseers of the Poor,⁴⁹ the clerk and agent for the Board was responsible for a considerable portion of their work.

Sect. 7. The clerk shall perform all duties required by the By-Laws of the Board, and shall keep a record of its meetings and transactions. The office hours shall be from 8:30 A. M. to 5:00 p.m. daily, on all regular business days.

Sect. 8. The clerk shall be agent of the Board, and is empowered to act for it officially; he shall have charge of the office and all papers and accounts relating to this department. The accounts shall be kept in a systematic and business-like manner, and open for inspection at all times to the members of the Board.

The agent shall visit all persons or families receiving aid in the various parts of the city at least twice a year, and shall report at each regular meeting the cases he has visited the previous month, giving a report of their condition and future prospects, that the Board may be thoroughly informed in regard to all persons receiving aid from the City. The agent shall immediately investigate all new cases after being notified by any one of the overseers, and give proper notice according to law.



Figure 8. Edwin M. Fowle, Overseer of the Poor 1893-1910.

He shall also investigate all hospital cases and determine their settlement. The agent may aid at the office in cases of emergency and all those cases placed in his hands by the Board. At each meeting he shall present the correspondence of the previous month, and submit all bills for approval. The agent shall also render a monthly account of money paid out for office expenses,

Sect. 9. The Board shall provide an assistant to act under direction of the agent in performing the duties of the office, at a salary to be determined by the Board.

Sect. 10. All applications for aid shall be referred to the agent for his investigation; he shall determine their settlement.

Sect. 11. In all cases where the local overseer and agent are not agreed as to the amount and kind of aid being rendered, the case shall be referred to the full Board by the chairman for action.

Sect. 12. All applications for the burial of paupers shall be referred to the agent of the Board of Overseers for his investigation.

Mr. Fowle was well-connected as an early (1861) member of the Dalhousie Lodge of Freemasons⁵⁰ and as a founding member of the Newton Center Improvement Association in 1870 along with the first mayor of the city, J.F.C. Hyde.¹⁷ He lived in West Newton and later at 33 Norwood Ave. on Crystal Lake.^{51,52} He was a ship owner⁵³ with offices at 34 India Wharf⁵⁴ and was the Commercial Agent for the Dominican Republic in Boston.⁵¹

Between 1899 and 1904, each of the seven overseers was paid \$50. Mr. Fowle, in his role as secretary of the overseers, was paid an additional \$1500.^{55,56} No remarks are made about a member of the Board of Overseers also being an employee of the board; but, perhaps, to resolve this conflict of interest, the Board of Overseers is dissolved in 1905 with Mr. Fowle becoming the sole Overseer of the Poor at a salary of \$1,668, which was increased to \$1700 the following year and to \$1800 in 1907.⁵⁷⁻⁶¹ During this entire period, the almshouse Warden and Matron (generally a combined husband/wife position) receive approximately half this amount.

In the report for 1905, Mr. Fowle relates the net cost of "Poor out of Almshouse" at about \$4200 for the year, a decrease of \$2543 from 1904, and attributed this and other economies to the change in dispensing charity through a single source, rather than having this done by one person in each ward.^{57,58}

Besides selling farm produce, the Almshouse/Poor Farm occasionally experimented in moneymaking endeavors to defray costs, which were less occasionally successful. In 1898, "The Almshouse department invested about one thousand dollars in standing wood....cutting and preparing it for market, and had the demand been what we expected, the result would have proved favorable, but as it is, we find ourselves with about two hundred cords of wood on hand."⁶²

Move to the Highlands. Early in 1899 the property on Beacon St. was sold and a new building authorized to be erected on the land previously purchased on Winchester St. The Almshouse was constructed next to the Diocesan (Xaverian Brothers) Working Boys Home and both were joined by the New England Peabody Home for Crippled Children in 1922, which was just north of the intersection of Dedham and Nahanton Streets, in what might be considered an almshouse

district. By the end of the year, the new Almshouse was nearly complete at a total cost of \$28,446.24, including both land and construction (Figures 5-6).⁵⁵

“On Monday, January 29, 1900, the inmates, sixteen in number, all in good health, were moved to the new building on Winchester St... The lot contains 25 acres, partly wooded, but with cleared land enough to supply the vegetables for the inmates and food for the stock. It is provided with a large kitchen, laundry, dining room and 28 sleeping rooms for the inmates, also toilet rooms and hospital wards, the central portion being devoted to the warden's house.” The almshouse was heated by steam, with a laundry and drying room in the basement, and a gas machine to supply light for the entire building (Figures 10-14). A large barn was in the rear of the house.⁴⁶ In 1905, the livestock consisted of three horses, four cows, four pigs and eighty fowl.⁵⁷

In the same report, Fowle expressed an opinion on pauperism: “The cause and cure of pauperism are still being studied carefully, but neither has as yet been discovered. Education would seem to be the antidote for pauperism; few who receive a good education fall into the dependent class, unless habits of dissipation are first contracted.”⁴⁶

He was also concerned about safeguarding the paupers’ records:

Another very important matter, which should receive attention, is the protection from fire of our records and books. We have on file about thirty-six hundred valuable histories of families who have been aided by this City, showing the acknowledged place of their settlement, the loss of which could never be replaced, and the City would be left powerless to defend itself against unfair claims for settlement of paupers.⁴⁶

In the following year, Fowle was pleased to report that “ample safe room has been provided for the protection of our histories and books of record, at a cost of \$275.”⁶³

In Massachusetts, every city and town had to relieve and support all indigent persons lawfully settled therein. In general, legal settlement was acquired by adults through residence in a city or town for five consecutive years and payment of taxes for any three years within that time, or through three consecutive years of residence upon a freehold owned by them. There were special provisions in regard to the settlement of women and children and exemptions in favor of war veterans.⁶⁴

Mr. Fowle felt that “it would be a gain to our city if less zeal were manifested in the collection of a poll-tax from our incoming foreign population. Some of our neighboring cities are almost exempt from liability for the support of their foreign poor for the reason that no attempt is made to collect such taxes and the resident thereby fails to gain a settlement. It would be a step in the right direction to eliminate from our settlement laws through legislative action the required payment of a poll tax.”⁶³

In a footnote to his 1903 report, Mr. Fowle notes that of the 44 inmates at the end of the year (Fig. 14), 33 were supported by the State Board of Insanity,⁶⁵ under the provisions of Chapter 451, Acts of 1900, which transferred control of the insane to the state board and opened a Colony for the Insane to receive them on January 1, 1904.⁶⁶

Newton Sets A Standard. The Newton Almshouse became a standard for early 20th century almshouses. The circa 1910 picture of the Almshouse was the frontpiece for a text on almshouses, *The Almshouse: Construction and Management*, which was sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation (Figures 15 & 16).⁷ The book included the floor plans of the almshouse and the author expressed the following opinions about it.

This almshouse is one of the newer institutions of its kind in the state. Its plan is approved by the Board of State Charities and is considered about standard. It has many admirable features. It has also some defects, chief of which, in the writer's opinion, is that of placing the kitchen and laundry in the basement. As is frequently the case, also, the sitting rooms are much too small; in this plan they are given considerably less floor space than the dining rooms.

The accommodations for the warden are sufficient and well arranged. It will be noticed that by means of a movable partition the two dining rooms can be thrown together so as to make a chapel or assembly hall for all the inmates.⁷



Figure 15. Advertisement for *The Almshouse* featuring the Newton Almshouse

In 1909, the State Board of Charity visited the Almshouse and reported that it was administered by Warden, James P. Goodman and his wife, who served as the matron, and that they were assisted by a man and two women.⁶⁷ There were three men to do general farm work, one man to help in the house and five women to do light housework. Unlike the superintendents of other New England almshouses,¹⁰ the Goodmans and their successors, the Ewarts, administered the almshouse for periods well in excess of a decade each. This means that not only did they find the work agreeable, but the Overseers were also agreeable to their work. This may partly be because the warden and matron had good living accommodations with twelve rooms and a bathroom.

By 1909 the almshouse also had electricity, a library of books, a sitting room and a smoking room.⁶⁷ Bedrooms had single occupants. The age distribution of the inmates was: one between 30 and 40; three between 40 and 50; two between 50 and 60; six between 60 and 70; five between 70 and 80; six between 80 and 90, and all lived there permanently, so the almshouse was well on its way to becoming a home for the aged. Nine had relatives in the city. One man and one woman were feeble-minded; one woman epileptic; one man and two women cripples. Notably there was one woman who paid to live there, another sign that the almshouse was well run. Six acres were ploughed and another fifteen tilled. The almshouse sold milk, vegetables and poultry,⁶⁷ so it was likely that the inmates were also well fed.

In 1909, Mr. Fowle indicated in the annual report: "We have discontinued the use of the name "Almshouse" and I believe that the above title [City Home] is more in harmony with the atmosphere of the place, and any one who will pay it a visit will agree with me."⁶⁸

ALMSHOUSE IN PICTURESQUE GROVE.

Structure in Process of Erection at Newton Highlands Notable Addition
To Municipal Buildings.

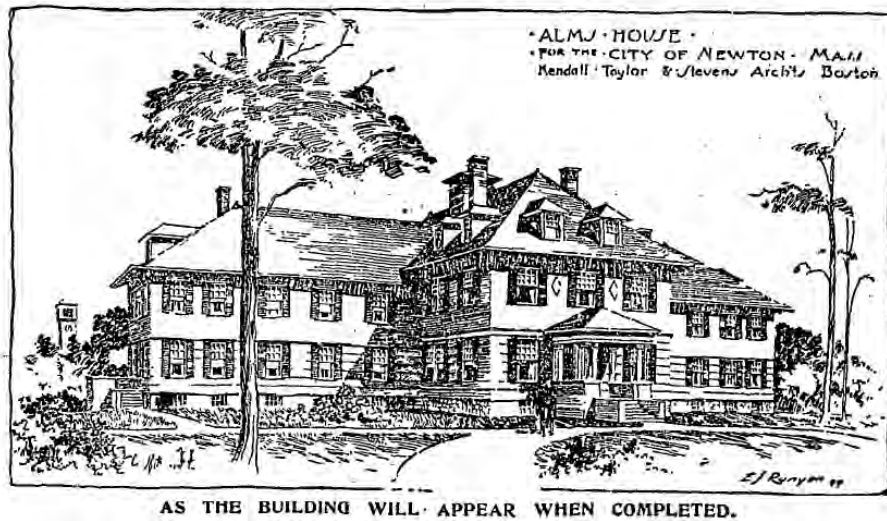


Figure 10. The architect's concept of the Newton Highlands Alms house (top) from the *Boston Globe* and the Alms house under construction in 1899. (Copy of photograph from Jackson Homestead.)

Almshouse Floor Plans⁷

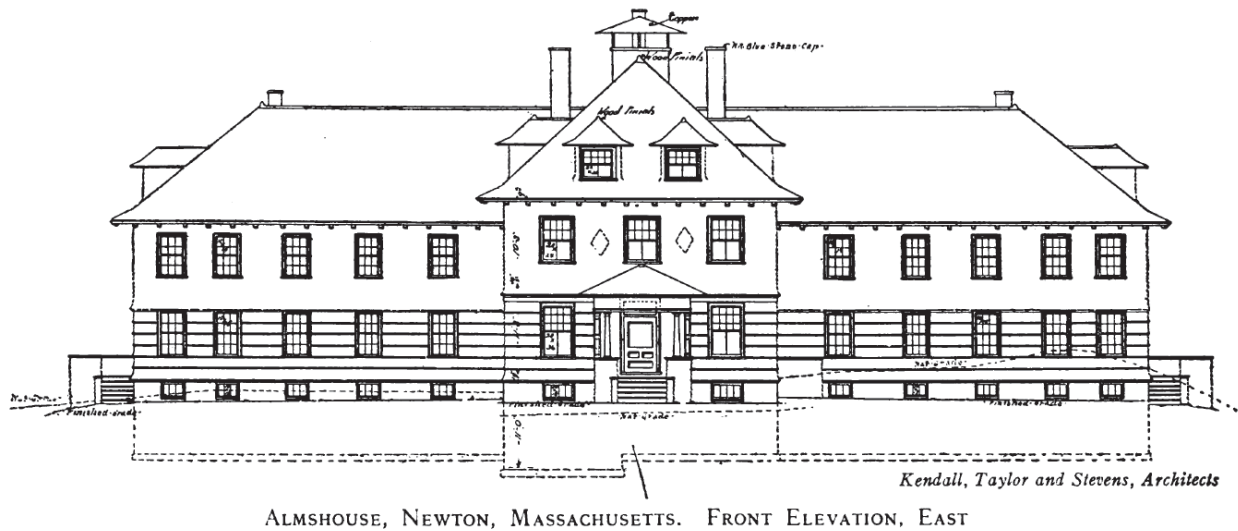


Figure 11. Almshouse front elevation from *The Almshouse*.

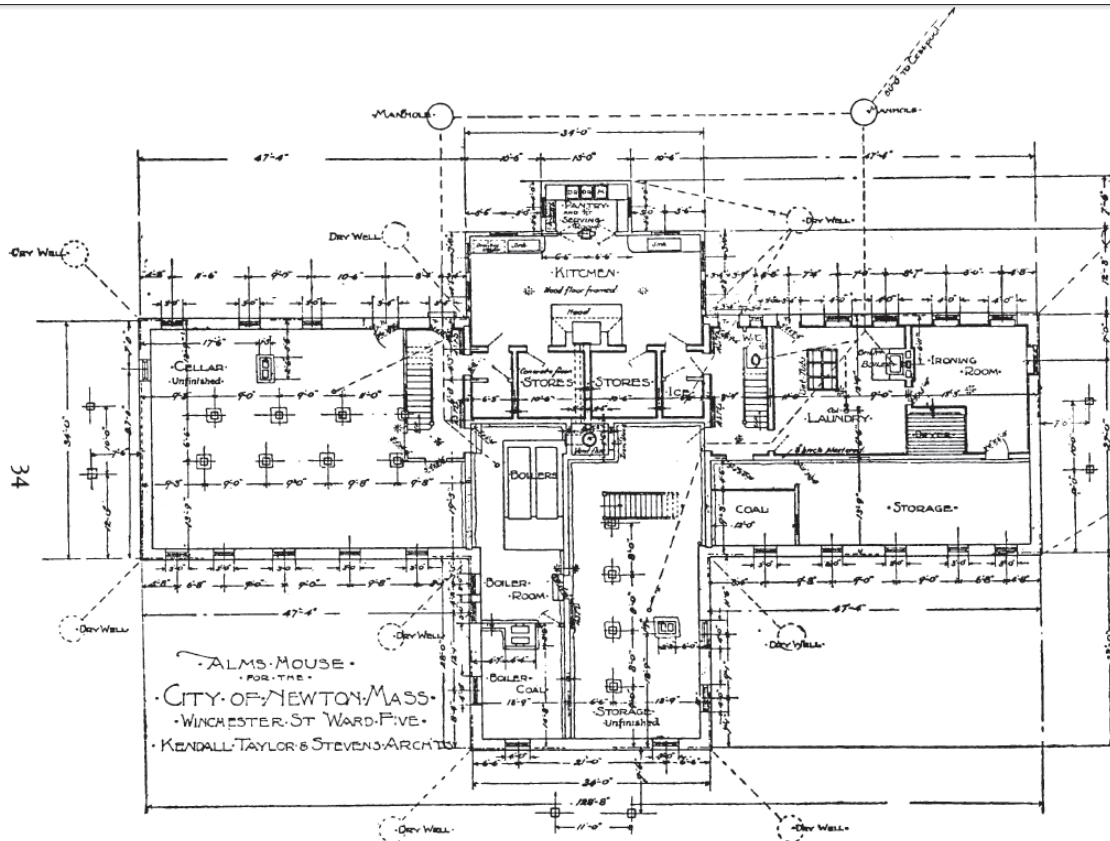


Figure 12. Plan for Almshouse basement from *The Almshouse*.

Almshouse Floor Plans⁷

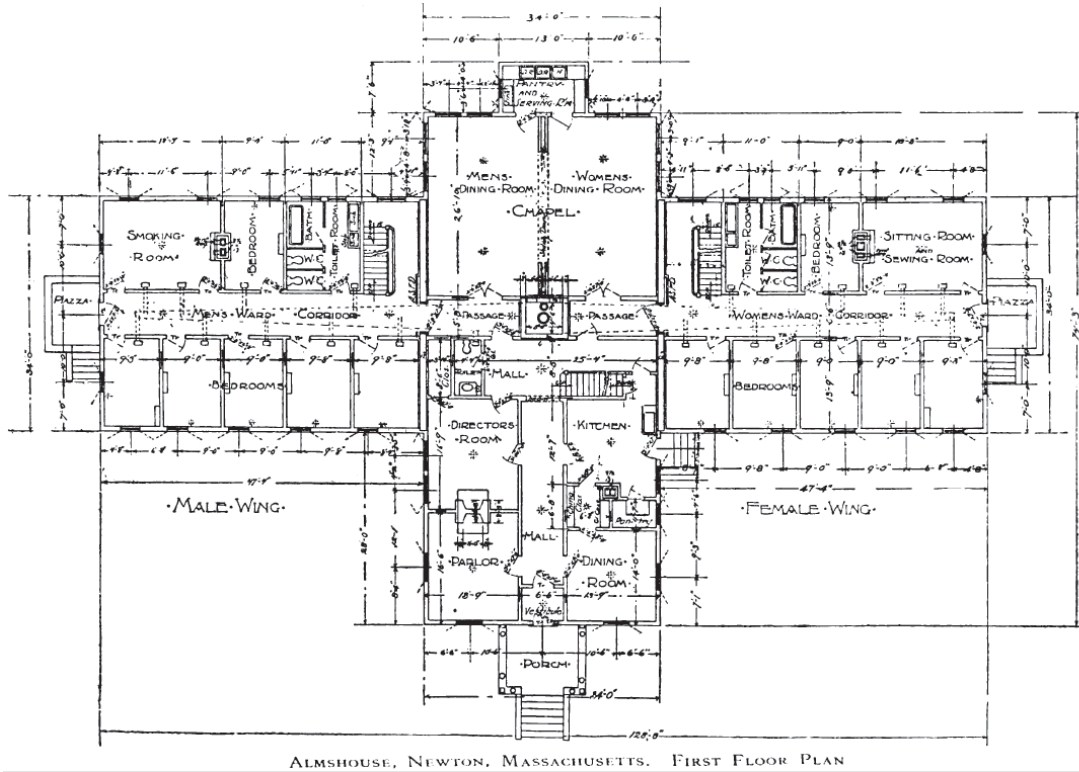


Figure 14. Almshouse second floor plan from *The Almshouse*.

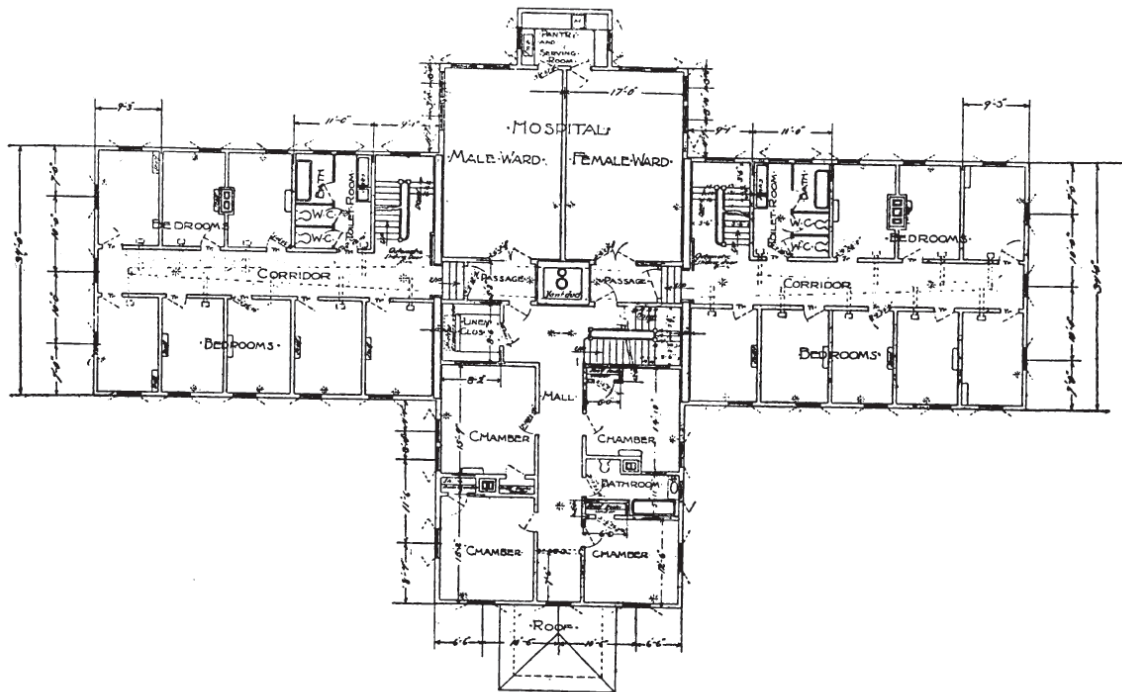
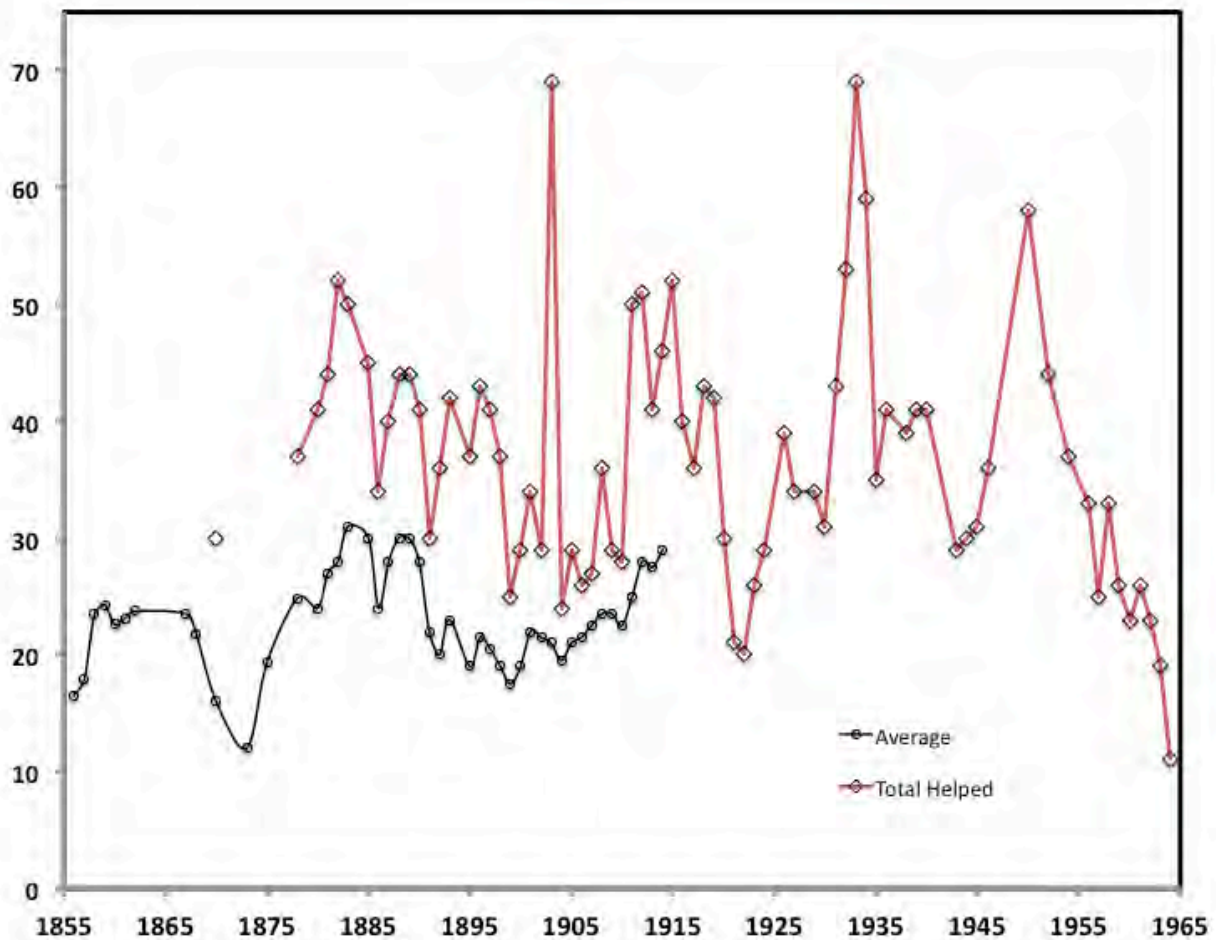


Figure 13. Almshouse first floor plan from *The Almshouse*.

Figure 14. Newton Almshouse Population 1870-1964



The 1903 population spike in the total number of people aided in the almshouse coincides with a comment that 33 of the total of 44 inmates at the end of the year were supported by the State Board of Insanity under the provisions of Chapter 451, Acts of 1900,⁶⁵ which transferred control of the insane to the state board and opened a State Colony for the Insane in Gardner, MA to receive them on January 1, 1904.⁶⁶ Later, Norfolk State Hospital for the chronically insane was also opened as a part of Foxborough State Hospital.

The spikes between 1910 and 1919 correlate with a number of severe recessions and depressions during this decade.

The peak in 1932 corresponds with the Great Depression.

The peak in 1950 is surprising, given the mildness of the post World War II recessions. The annual report of the Public Welfare Department makes no comment on the population peak in this year.

Expansion. After Edwin M. Fowle dies in 1910, the number served in the City Home reaches a record of 50 with the average population being 26 in 1911. Mr. Fowle's secretary, Ernest R. Lowe, took over as Overseer and notes in the 1910 report that the capacity of the City Home would soon be reached. Lowe then recommends the following:⁶⁹

... that serious consideration be given to the plan of establishing a city store at the City Home, purchasing supplies at wholesale and delivering them to paupers in our own wagon. This method has been tried with great success and economy in a number of cities and is a decided improvement over the old method of issuing orders indiscriminately on a large number of dealers. The system gives the pauper the benefit of wholesale prices, enabling him to receive much more for a two-dollar order than he now receives.

Oswald J. McCourt replaced Lowe in 1912 and in 1916 provided the following evidence that a remnant of the workhouse days yet remain, as well as one of the sources of poverty.

The system of compelling able-bodied men to do a day's work at the City Home in return for the food order is still in operation, and has been working successfully....One of the many causes of poverty which leads to the asking of public aid was wife desertion. In every instance the offender was successfully prosecuted.⁷⁰

Probably because of the capacity problems (Fig. 14), between 1912 and 1914 two dormitories are added with a total of 40 beds, probably in the attic.^{67,71,72} Around 1917 two three-story "piazzas" are built onto each end of building in the place of the original piazzas. These extensions are 10.5' x 34' and 36' high and are evident in the 1927 picture of the City Home along with many dormers added in attic (Figure 17).⁷³

In 1927, McCourt was succeeded by his secretary,⁷⁴ Florence S. Fitzgerald, who became the first Director of Public Welfare when the Charity Department evolved into the Public Welfare Department in 1929.⁷⁵

Cautionary Tales. In 1912, Mr. & Mrs. John Ewart replaced Mr. & Mrs. James P. Goodman as the superintendent and matron of the Newton City Home.⁷⁰ On a February afternoon in 1915 one of the Ewart's children, seven-year old Thomas, was playing with two neighbor children, five-year-old Ellen Edwards and her seven-year old brother William, who lived next door at 499 Winchester St. Their father, Harry Edwards, was a coachman at the Nahanton St. estate of Robert Gould Shaw, 2nd, a first cousin of the Civil War Col. Robert Gould Shaw,⁷⁶ whose statue is on Boston Common.

Although they had been warned against it, the children were playing on the ice on the Charles River, which is about half a mile from the almshouse. Ellen broke through and her brother fell in while trying to rescue her. Thomas watched both drown and then hurried home. Because he had been punished for playing on the ice, he did not tell of the tragedy until two hours later and then, when Mrs. Edwards called Mr. Ewart by telephone to ask if her children were there, the father questioned his small son, who replied that they were "in the river" and led a searching party to the spot where they broke through. On the ice at the edge of the hole was found a bow and arrows that William Edwards had made during the afternoon. Police and volunteers dragged two boats over the ice and snow from Newton Upper Falls and, after hours of work, the body of the

boy was recovered.⁷⁷ The story of this tragedy persisted for a century in the Highlands/Oak Hill neighborhood as a caution for children.⁷⁸

Rarely is there a record of why someone entered the almshouse. One of the few instances was told in a 1905 story in the Boston Globe.⁷⁹ Alderman and banker, Frank A. Day, sent a certified check to the Overseers of the Poor for \$4,300 for the board of Ada Bridges, who turned out to be a distant relative of Ald. Day and had been in the almshouse since 1882. Miss Bridges had been brought up in luxury, but through unwise investments lost her entire fortune. Having no means of earning a livelihood, she entered the almshouse when she was 39. Her misfortunes preyed upon her mind, and by 1905 she had become somewhat demented, but remained active and was a great favorite with the other inmates. Mr. Day not only paid for the years she had been at the almshouse, but also provided a substantial amount to the Secretary of the Overseers, E.M. Fowle, to insure her future comfort.



The Hermit of Nonantum. The Boston Globe described John Mayo as “probably the oddest and most eccentric resident of Newton”.⁸⁰ He was blind, kept visitors away, and lived in a tumble-down cottage on Faxon St. in Nonantum. Possessed of considerable means, yet loth to part with it, he refused to yield to those who wished him to go to the poor farm. He lived in a single room with an old and rusty stove and the only other furnishings being an old table and a dilapidated lounge chair covered with ragged blankets. He dressed in a dirty brown coat and black overalls. His beard was unkempt and his long gray hair matted and unbrushed. While sightless, he was familiar with and moved with surprising agility over every inch of his little hovel and surroundings. He was born in England, had a good education, but his parents died shortly after they immigrated to Boston, when he was 12. He sold fruit and papers on the Boston and Maine Railroad and soon became a brakeman. Later he worked as a mill hand in Nonantum; but, when he was 49, an attack of pneumonia undermined his health and left him blind. Undaunted, he lived by himself and kept the oaken door to his shanty barred and the window shades drawn. When he was 67, neighbors found him prostrated on his kitchen floor and took him to the almshouse, which he vigorously protested afterward. While he recovered, he died in the almshouse a year later.⁸¹

Almshouse Buildings. An undated mimeographed map (Figure 18) of the almshouse group identifies all but one of the buildings and indicates that the barn and piggery were destroyed by fire.⁸² The unidentified building is evident on all the several maps of the poor farm from 1907 to 1929, and so can be assigned as the ice house, which is an approximately 12’ x 12’ structure behind the almshouse.

In 1931, the Public Buildings Department listed the value of the City Home Group buildings as: alms house \$60,000; ice house, \$700; piggery, \$2000; barn shed, hennery and garage; \$12,000.⁸³ This was revised in the listing of 1936 as: alms house, \$60,000; garage, \$11,000; stable, piggery, ice house, henneries, \$2,000.⁸⁴ In 1937, a new building appears on the list as: alms house, \$60,000; garage, \$11,000; vegetable house, stable, piggery, ice house, hennery \$2,700.

The Winchester Street Almshouse



Figure 16. The almshouse circa 1910. This picture appeared in the 1911 book, *The Almshouse, Construction and Management*. (This copy from the Jackson Homstead).



Figure 17. Almshouse in 1927. Note the extensions at either end, the dormers in the roof and the circular planting area. (Copy of Jackson Homstead photograph.)

A 1937 building permit specifies the new building's size as 50' w, 20' d, 30' h. It was constructed with 12" thick brick walls for the first story and attic on a 20" thick foundation of stone and mortar (Figures 20-30). The building has 8"x8" girders, 2x6 rafters, 2x12 floor timbers, and a pitched roof with asphalt shingles.⁸⁵ The permit indicates that the building was for storage, which could be consistent with a vegetable house; however, the changes in the Public Buildings records could also support the new building as being a garage. On the 1960 Sanborn map (Figure 7), it is labeled as a toolhouse.⁸⁶ Considering its depression-era construction, it may be relevant that there were 550 WPA workers in Newton at the time.⁸⁷ The building permit clearly describes the sole remaining building of the almshouse group as well as one of the few physical remnants of 233 years of almshouse history in Newton.

A spectacular three-alarm blaze on January 7, 1956 destroyed the large 2 ½ story barn, the nearby piggery, and likely the porte-cochere on the toolhouse (Figure 23), as well as causing the evacuation of the almshouse.^{88,89} A building permit dated December 21, 1956 is for a pitched steel roof on a 16' ft high storage building 30' x 30' with a concrete foundation 4' high and 12 inches thick for an estimated cost of \$3650.^{89,90} A building of approximately these dimensions is labeled as a barn on the 1960 Sanborn map (Figure 7).⁸⁶ However, there are letters documenting that the barn was then razed in 1960.⁹¹

The large, 1899, barn foundation survives behind the almshouse between the Charles River Country Club golf course (Figure 34) and about 30 yards north west of the brick toolhouse. To the east of the barn and adjacent to the Charles River Country Club is a brick foundation, which was likely the west end of the hennerly. To the north is a clearing of the approximate size and shape of the hennerly and storage shed (Figure 35). Further north and just south of the Hillis' property line is the Ranney foundation (Figure 19). Just west of the north foundation entrance to the brick toolhouse, is a river rock structure consistent with being a loading dock or possibly the lower entrance to a New England ice house (Figure 33). About 30 feet immediately behind (west) of the brick toolhouse is a stone manhole (Figure 31), possibly one of the two original cesspools. There is also a trench structure with stone walls about 50' south of the toolhouse along the south stone retaining wall (Figure 45). Farther south is a large stone oval (Figures 40-41) with bolts with square nuts imbedded in the mortar on the top, which may have been a covered well. Finally, a river rock wall that probably marks the border of the road to the Doyle house can be seen south of the current road to the soccer field (Figure 44).

Public Welfare Department. The first reference to the change in names from Newton City Home to Newton City Infirmary is evident in a 1946 building permit for alterations “as per plans.”⁹² As noted in the 1962 report, “The Infirmary, despite its name, does not provide medical or nursing care.”⁹³ Similar name changes occurred elsewhere in Massachusetts and reflect the aging population then served by former almshouses. In a brief “History of Public Welfare in Newton” contained in the 1961 report, the Director of Public Welfare, George S. Wattendorf, states:⁹⁴

From 1935 on, with the advent of the Social Security Act and Federal and State participation in public assistance, the work of the department became more complex and specialized. The categories of Old Age Assistance and Aid to Dependent Children (formerly Mothers’ Aid) came into being. In 1951 Disability Assistance was added. Medical Assistance to the Aged - an amendment to the Old Age Assistance Law - came in 1960....

What is the future of public assistance in Newton? That is difficult to predict, due to a number of unknown factors. For one thing, the needs of all other poor persons not now covered under Social Security may be covered some day under a new title, such as “General Assistance”. This would probably, in this area, abolish “settlements”, an archaic system of determining the financial liability of cities, towns and the Commonwealth, which system is based on the “Poor Laws” of Elizabethan England. For another thing, the State may eventually take over direct administration of all public assistance in Massachusetts, as is done in many other States.⁹⁴

The Poor Farm land remained in agricultural use until the end of the almshouse. In 1961, Wattendorf, remarked:

Poultry and farm programs were carried on, with the result that the tables were well supplied with produce, and surpluses were preserved for use in the winter months. The Infirmary also benefitted by the State's Surplus Commodity Program. Male guests with limited work capacity helped out on the farm and with household chores. Efforts were made to rehabilitate and re-establish in the community all guests who could be so helped.⁹⁵

In January, 1963, Wattendorf submitted a study indicating that the cost of continuing the Infirmary would be competitive with sending the remaining guests to state institutions.⁹⁶ He also suggested that the almshouse could be used as a civil defense shelter or as a regional infirmary. In the subsequent annual report, Wattendorf referred to the dwindling population of the Newton City Infirmary and that residents helped out by doing farm work and housekeeping chores; but, significantly, wrote:

In February [1963] an historic decision was reached by the City. It decided to close the Infirmary permanently on or about April 1, 1964.... The closing of the Infirmary was no new idea or sudden impulse on the part of the City Administration. It had been discussed for at least the last ten years.⁹⁷

Finally, “The Infirmary was closed April 1, 1964 because of the ever dwindling population that could be cared for in other ways, and the keys were turned over to the Public Buildings Commissioner.”⁹⁸

In a letter inviting current and former Commission members to a farewell dinner, Wattendorf narrated that: “As of July 1, 1968 the Massachusetts State Department of Public Welfare is to direct administration of the Public Welfare system under centralized control at the State level and local city and town Boards of Public welfare will then be abolished.” After the dinner on June 4, the Public Welfare Commission held its last meeting on June 26, 1968.⁹⁹

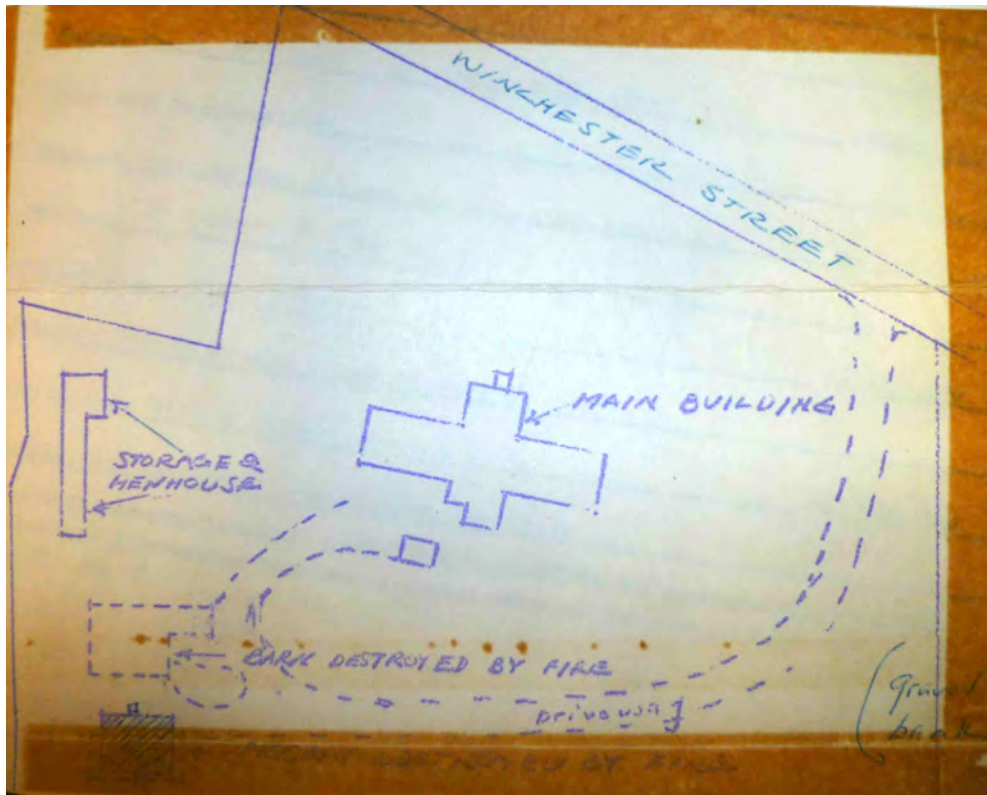


Figure 18. Undated mimeographed map indicating the original barn and piggery destroyed by fire. Comparison with the 1960 Sanborn map indicates that this map is prior to 1960. Newton Fire Department records and the *Boston Globe* indicate a 3-alarm fire on 1/7/1956 that destroyed the large 2 ½ story barn and caused the evacuation of the almshouse.



Figure 19. Foundation of the Ranney barn, which was located between the hennerly and the east boundary line. See 1900 Stadly Map (Fig. 2) and the 1874 (Fig. 5). This barn was razed between 1890 purchase and 1895 (1895 Atlas, Fig. 5).

The Remaining Building



Figure 20. North facade with recurved retaining wall.



Figure 21. South and east facades.



Figure 22. South facade.



Figure 23. North facade with equipment entrance and burnt porte-cochere.



Figure 25 Basement north.



Figure 26. South basement.



Figure 27. Shop floor southeast.



Figure 28. Shop floor north.



Figure 29. Shop floor west.



Figure 30. Attic north.

Landscape Structures



Figure 31. Stone cesspool west of toolhouse.



Figure 32. River rock structure northwest of toolhouse.



Figure 34. Barn foundation north.



Figure35. Barn foundation south.

Almshouse Foundation



Figure 36. Almshouse foundation south.



Figure 37. Almshouse foundation northeast corner.



Figure 38. Almshouse foundation southeast corner.



Figure 39. Vestibule foundation.



Figure 40. Stone oval.



Figure 41. Stone oval front opening.



Figure 42. West end of the henry foundation looking east.



Figure 43. East end of the henry and storage shed site looking west.

Nahanton Park. As early as December 12, 1963, the Recreation Commissioner, John B. Penney, requested that the Recreation Commission be given first consideration on acquiring the Infirmary land for playground purposes, when the Infirmary was abandoned.¹⁰⁰ Between 1963 and 1968, the Recreation Commission repeatedly discussed and requested the Infirmary land. Just before the formal demise of the Public Welfare Commission and Department on July 1, 1968, a meeting of the Recreation Commission occurred at which:

Commissioner Penney reported that the Board of Aldermen had acted on the Infirmary land. Effective by July 1, 1968, the transfer of approximately 20 acres of land, known as the "Infirmary Land" on Winchester St. from the Welfare Department to the Recreation Department (about 10 acres of this land may be used by School Department if needed).¹⁰¹

In response to suggestions in the "1969 Recreation/Open Space Report" to develop the Infirmary land for playfields, Recreation Commissioner Penney recommended "deferment until the future", but would recommend sufficient improvement in the existing building for use as a park building for the mini-bike program.¹⁰² In 1975, "Friends of Animals", a local nonprofit group, requested the Recreation Commission to use one of the buildings (suggesting that the original almshouse was still there) as an animal shelter.¹⁰³ However, a 1975 map for the planned Charles River Pathway through Oak Hill, shows the brick structure and Poor Farm roads, but not the almshouse.¹⁰⁴ It is not clear when the almshouse was demolished, but its distinct foundation remains (Figures 36-39).

At some later time, probably in 1965, when a new electrical service was installed in the toolhouse,^{105,106} the Public Buildings Department was allowed to use the brick toolhouse as a carpentry and cabinetry shop. The restoration of City Hall's wooden windows was performed in the shop.

In 1987, Newton received a grant from the State Urban Self Help Program to develop 32 acres of the former Novitiate lands (previously the Xaverian Brothers Diocesan Working Boys Home) as a park. This land was combined with the Infirmary land to make Nahanton Park.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, all of Nahanton Park has an almshouse heritage.

Alms for the Almshouse. The agricultural use of the Poor Farm land has been retained. In 1974, the community garden plots were started and administered by the Public Buildings Department.¹⁰⁸ In 1987, when Nahanton Park was formed,¹⁰⁷ the Parks and Recreation Department took over the administration of the garden plots.¹⁰⁸ Fortunately, as a 2011 Natural Resources Inventory of Nahanton Park indicates, the Poor Farm was situated on two excellent areas of agricultural soil.¹⁰⁹

The Poor Farm landscape includes the brick toolhouse, the almshouse foundation, the barn foundation, the Ranney barn foundation, a large stone well, a stone cesspool, the hennerly site, a river rock loading dock structure, a stone trench and the original farm roads (Figures 19 & 31-44), which can be used as trails. This landscape provides the basis for an educational comparison between the abandoned Poor Farm and the working Angino Farm nearby. Figure 46 depicts an outline of the almshouse on a map of Nahanton Park. The outline is consistent with a suggestion that a hemlock hedge be planted along its foundation to show where the almshouse stood.

Newton is currently wondering what to do with the stone and brick workshop, which has not been well-maintained. It is full of flammable refuse (Figs. 25-30), has a broken floor joist, and needs roof and masonry repairs. The Public Buildings Department, which controls the structure, feels that it is unusable as a public building and would cost \$255,507 to rehabilitate, including electrical, mechanical, plumbing, roof and building envelope repairs/improvements.^{110,111}

In an overview study of Nahanton Park, the Massachusetts Audubon Society recommended that the City either find a park use for the brick and stone toolhouse, or tear it down and naturalize the site.¹⁰⁹ However, the report failed to grasp the cultural and historic significance of the Poor Farm and the remaining almshouse structure, which was built at the end of the Depression.^{112,113} Upon a recommendation from the Newton Conservators¹¹⁴ and after hearing a presentation on the Newton Almshouses, the Parks & Recreation Commission unanimously voted to go to the Historical Commission to have the Alms House site added to the Massachusetts Historical Register.¹¹⁵ The Historical Commission also voted unanimously to recommend to the Massachusetts Historical Commission that the building and landscape at 525 Winchester Street in Nahanton Park be determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.¹¹⁶

As part of a discussion to allow the construction of a temporary fire station on the site of the Almshouse in Nahanton Park, Duane Hillis and Peter Kastner, who were instrumental in the formation of the park, advocated for demolishing the remaining toolhouse, which is the most likely outcome, if a suitable parks or recreation use is not found for it.¹¹⁷⁻¹¹⁹

Possible uses of the toolhouse include: storage for the community garden plots at Nahanton Park, storing canoes, for those in Newton who don't have room in their homes or apartments; and maintaining the cabinetry shop for city use, but extending it to community woodworkers as well.⁷⁷ All of which could be in harmony with the recreational purposes of Nahanton Park and would help preserve Newton's history of helping those who were down and out over the 231 year span of Newton's almshouses.

What happened to the last Newton Almshouse? Nobody seems to know. There are no records of it's being demolished or destroyed by fire. If you know, or have pictures or stories of the almshouse and poor farm, please send an e-mail to clarke@bc.edu.

Dedicated to New England's almshouse rounders.
Michael J. Clarke
Newton, Massachusetts
2012



Figure 44. Road to the Doyle house.



Figure 45. South facade and stone trench.



Figure 46. Map of Nahanton Park showing approximate outline of the almshouse foundation in green.

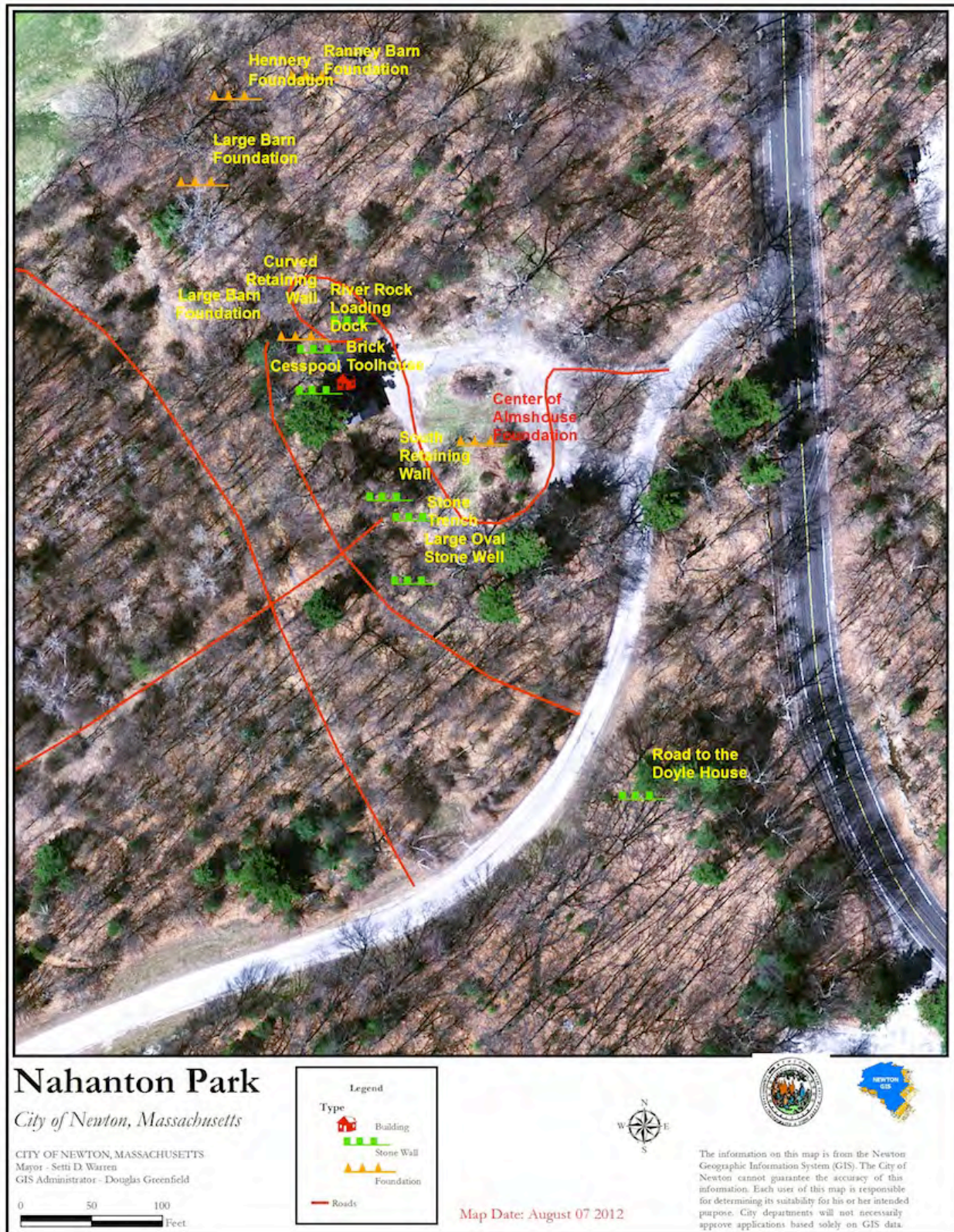


Figure 47. Almshouse Landscape Features

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